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From hashtags to the streets :
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM
EXAMPLES FROM AFRICA

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From past struggles for independence to today's protests against normalised violence, women in Africa have asserted their leadership in social and political movements. Yet even when praised for their activism, they remain excluded from decision-making. Digital technologies offer clear opportunities for women-led political movements in Africa, but they also bring risks and limitations that make tapping the potential more difficult.

Digital technologies can help women overcome barriers to political mobilisation, such as limited time, mobility restrictions and lack of self-confidence to express political views. In the digital space, they can connect with like-minded, politically active online communities and find tools to amplify marginalised issues and perspectives. However, online movements by women are less visible due to the digital gender divide and algorithms which reproduce historical biases against women, non-Western individuals and minorities. Furthermore, politically active women online suffer more and more from backlashes in the form of gender-based violence, disinformation and more.

Support for women-led digital activism in Africa, therefore, needs to be diversified taking greater account of the digital divide. To increase their impact, movements and activists can combine tactics and engage in hashtag- and other online activism, street protests and policy advocacy, like for the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. Embedding political activism in cultural contexts and traditional practices is a particularly promising avenue. States and regional institutions can play a proactive role by establishing policies and standards that empower women politically while regulating tech companies and helping women overcome barriers to political engagement, both online and offline.

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Acronyms

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ADFM	Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc
AfCHPR	African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights
AfDB	African Development Bank
APC	Association for Progressive Communications
AU	African Union
AWiM	African Women in the Media
BBOG	Bring back our girls
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFFP	Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy
CIPESA	ICT Policy Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa
CSO	Civil society organisation
D4D	Digital4Development
DTS	Digital Transformation Strategy
EC	European Commission
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
MENA	Middle East & North Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PDM	Pepper Dem Ministries
SARS	Special Anti-Robbery Squad
REC	Regional economic community
UN	United Nations
WACC	World Association for Christian Communication
WOUGNET	Women in Uganda Network
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFT	Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne
UNOY	United Network of Young Peacebuilders
VPN	Virtual private network
WISP	Women in Security and Privacy

1. Introduction

Women in Africa have traditionally asserted their leadership in movements for better governance, democratic principles, gender equality and social justice. From past struggles for independence to today's protests against normalised violence,[1] climate inaction and unconstitutional power grabs, women are at the forefront. Yet, despite women's involvement in shaping their countries' and continent's futures, they remain largely excluded from decision-making. As of May 2022, women made up just 26% of parliamentarians in sub-Saharan Africa (equal to the global average of women parliamentarians, which is low); this was 16% in North Africa.[2] Within sub-Saharan Africa, countries and regions differ widely. In East and Southern Africa more than 30% of parliamentarians are women, whereas in Central and West Africa, this is about 22% and 17%, respectively (IPU 2022). Regarding local councillors, women made up 29% in sub-Saharan Africa and 18% in Western Asia and Northern Africa as of January 2020, compared to the global average of 36% (UN Statistics Division 2020; UN Women N.d.). Thus, political governance remains a largely male prerogative.

On paper, most African countries have committed to advancing women's participation in political governance through international frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), continental frameworks such as the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights, as well as national policies. Moreover, some continental legal instruments that are not focused on gender equality integrate gender equality objectives throughout their provisions. This is the case in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), which was adopted in 2008 as a pillar of the pan-African governance agenda (Box 1) (Abdulmelik and Belay 2019).

Box 1. Gender equality in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance

*In the ACDEG, women's participation in decision making and governance processes is a **precondition for good governance and democracy** (Article 10 and 29.1) (Abdulmelik and Belay 2019). To fulfil this precondition, the ACDEG calls for measures like:*

Legal and administrative guarantees for the rights of women and marginalised groups (Article 8.2)

Gender parity in governance processes (Article 2.11)

Deeper changes by states to ensure the "necessary conditions of full and active participation of women … at all levels" (Article 29.2)

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[1] The term "normalised violence" encompasses the widespread use of violence and human rights violations by authoritarian states and security forces against their citizenry, as well as gender-based violence fuelled by social norms that uphold toxic masculinities.

[2] Inter-Parliamentary Union uses available data from 45 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and 4 countries in North Africa. For more information, see: Regional groupings.

Though its implementation has not been successful across the board, legal instruments like the ACDEG can be **useful tools for political and civil society advocates seeking to advance women's rights and democratic governance in an integrated way**. These show that countries themselves are committed to approaching gender equality as a societal and political issue, rather than as a women's issue. Collective action can hold countries to account on their progress towards these objectives and shortcomings. To do so, **movements and networks of activists led by women are making increasing use of digital technologies**.

This report explores how digitalisation is impacting women's involvement and women-led movements for gender equality and democratic governance. It is based on extended desk research using a variety of sources (academic articles, policy briefs, research reports and grey literature, from African and non-African authors). It is aimed at a diverse audience of policymakers, researchers, practitioners and activists working on issues of political governance, gender equality and digital transformation.

In the past three decades, digital technologies have deeply altered political and democratic governance processes. Significant parts of the political conversation, campaigns and sometimes elections themselves have moved online. Digital technologies are used to spread information and mobilise citizens around common political and governance-related grievances, but also to intimidate and oppress activists and minorities. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, shifting more of the political debate from the physical to the digital world.

The movements covered in this analysis are primarily women-led activist groups addressing societal issues. The topics they confront range from challenges facing women – beyond the pursuit of gender equality – to other political issues, such as advocating regime change and fighting police brutality. Some of these activist groups have one foot in "traditional" civil society, being registered civil society organisations (CSOs), but more often these groups revolve around a nebula of online supporters mobilised via social networks by a core of highly driven individuals. Where relevant, the analysis considers women's roles within wider forms of activism, as well as LGBTQI+ movements, which share some features.

The technologies included in the digitalisation trend include direct/private communication technologies, such as telephone, SMS, email and apps like WhatsApp and Signal; information and services technologies, ranging from websites to e-voting and web mapping platforms; and social media platforms that offer public or semi-public spaces for exchanges (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok). Each of these technologies has their own technical properties, business models and ways users appropriate and are influenced by them. They offer opportunities to challenge gender norms and strengthen women's movements, but they also have an excluding effect on citizens who are not in a position to use them. They furthermore have a tendency to reinforce existing narratives, biases and power imbalances (Diepeveen 2022). For instance, women overall have less access to digital technologies and the internet than men, globally and in Africa. This phenomenon is called the "digital gender divide".

Changes linked to digitalisation are rapid and ongoing, with very context-dependent implications that make them difficult to analyse. Social movements that organise online are, by nature, more difficult to grasp than those run by registered CSOs with a legal personality. Some aim explicitly to remain under the radar, and use encryption technologies to do so. Most accounts of how digitalisation impacts women activists and women-led movements distort reality by making generalisations, and are either overly optimistic and romanticised (e.g., asserting that one can simply replicate the "Arab Spring formula" of online organising as a "one size fits all" solution in other African countries); or overly pessimistic (Chiweshe 2017). For instance, a growing literature portrays the youth as politically

apathetic and satisfied with "lazy" forms of activism (so-called "slacktivism")[3] due to the rise of digital technologies (Davis 2011).

The present report acknowledges the potential of digital technologies to boost feminist and women-led political movements in Africa, while also considering the negative trends and risks. As it is based on desk research and a limited number of interviews, it should be read in the understanding that knowledge about women's roles in political movements in Africa is limited, and existing scholarship on women's use of digital technologies is biased towards the better-connected (and to some extent towards anglophone) countries.

The next section of this paper presents the main ways digital technologies can strengthen feminist and women-led political movements. Section three addresses the limitations and risks inherent in the trend towards digital activism. Section four summarises lessons learnt on how digital technologies can be used to support women-led political activism. Section five offers concluding remarks and recommendations for activist organisations, policymakers and academia.

2. How digital technologies can strengthen feminist and women-led political movements

2.1. Reinforcing and connecting social movements

Self-affirmation of activists and navigating social control

Digital technologies can help women and gender minorities build self-confidence and awareness of their power to partake in societal change, which is a precondition for effective movements. The gender norms prevalent in most African countries (and in the world) focus on women's *roles* as mothers and caregivers in the private home, overlooking their *value and power* as changemakers in the public sphere of political governance. Even when women are involved in the governance of their communities, they are often relegated to informal spaces and to positions as advisors and influencers rather than as formal power holders and decision makers. Prevalent gender norms also signal to LGBTQI+ people that their very existence is a danger to the social order. By contrast, men are taught and expected to assert power even when they are not ready to do so.

Digital technologies have enabled the emergence of online communities in which women and gender minorities can find **new tools for self-empowerment, including platforms for self-expression, access to role models, and information and stories related to identity-building**. For example, online discussion of taboos around sexuality and menstrual stigma can give women a sense of reclaiming their bodies, leading to increased self-confidence (Lewis et al. 2013). Since 2017, the #Metoo movement, which encourages women to testify publicly about their experiences of sexual violence through social media such as Twitter, has liberated speech and empowered women to challenge the gender-based violence that they experience individually and as a collective. However, it is worth noting that the #Metoo movement has found modest echo in Africa compared to other continents.[4]

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[3]   The term "slacktivism" describes the trend of "normalisation of political action as a minimal effort task" that can be undertaken online without need to participate in street protests. Examples of slacktivism include signing petitions and retweeting without also engaging through other forms of activism (Kudzai 2017).

[4]   Among other reasons, patriarchal norms and attitudes on the African continent may compel victims to focus on different issues, frame gender-based violence differently, or remain silent or at least anonymous. The modest echo can also be explained by the more limited internet penetration in Africa and inequalities in digital access.

Another value added of online platforms is the **anonymity** they provide to users. This allows women and gender minorities to express themselves, explore their identity and organise for action. In contrast, in the physical space women may be confronted with various forms of dissuasion or sanctions by their male counterparts or the broader community. Anonymity can make it possible for women and LBGTQI+ people to expose violence they have undergone without being identified by the perpetrator. For instance, in South Africa, female university students started a "confessions" movement, sharing testimonies of sexual abuse in online social media groups in which their anonymity could be preserved (Lewis et al. 2013). By dissociating the online persona from the physical individual, social media platforms allow activists and women, but also men, to feel less constrained by patriarchal norms. However, this does bring the risk of dehumanising the individuals one interacts with online.

Another risk is that activism can come as a **third workload** for many women, on top of economic and domestic responsibilities. Of course, this can affect activists of any gender. But it is particularly pertinent when women's activism is negatively perceived and can engender alienation or physical violence (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021).

Building national and transnational communities

Digital technologies can help women overcome barriers to mobilisation for political change, such as a restricted freedom of movement and lack of social and political networks in certain contexts. In doing so, digital platforms make activism more manageable at the individual level. Women can work at locations where they feel safe; or they can alternate between low intensity "clicktivism" and physical mobilisation. Where freedoms are especially limited, digital technologies can help women evade restrictions and build their political networks. Through social media, women but also LGBTQI+ people can reach others and tap into networks they may not have access to in their physical environment. This can even lead to international alliances among organisations (Box 2).

By giving access to transnational networks, **digital technologies enable activists to draw from a broad range of concepts, tactics and experiences** towards more effective political and gender equality change. Nationally rooted movements can use digital platforms to engage with diaspora, gain momentum, and attract international attention and resources. Women and women-led political movements can find **networks of similarly minded individuals and benefit from the experience of "bridge leaders".** These are well-connected and politically skilled individuals and organisations willing to share their knowledge and networks with others.[5] Support from bridge leaders can be key in helping feminist movements achieve meaningful change.[6]

> ### Box 2. Leveraging the power of transnational communities to *#BringBackOurGirls* in Nigeria
>
> Alliance-building beyond the national level amplified the impact of the #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG) movement in Nigeria following the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok by Boko Haram. The abduction was not the first or largest one by Boko Haram, nor was it the deadliest. But the activation of transnational communities it unleashed shone a damning light on the lack of governmental response to these events.

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[5]   The term "bridge leader" was coined in the American civil rights movement and is increasingly applied to women's movements in Africa (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021).

[6]   According to Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. (2021), the Moroccan *Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc* (ADFM) acted as bridge leader in support of a grassroots women's movement seeking recognition as a collective holder of land rights. From 2009 to 2012, the ADFM, an urban-based organisation, lent its resources to the rural movement, which already had internal coherence around shared grievances, but lacked the political skills and network to impact decision makers.

In the subsequent months and years, the #BBOG movement was animated by online calls to action from foreign embassies in Nigeria, the Nigerian diaspora, Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai and others. Most online posts about the abductions came from people or organisations outside the initial movement, suggesting that the movement had become global through social media.

This greatly increased its visibility and "extracted" responses from public officials who had remained silent to the tragedy. The government directly linked its reactions to the abductions to the #BBOG movement through official communiqués and the creation of a dedicated ministry desk, and the president eventually met with the families of the abducted girls. More controversially, Nigeria hired lobbyists abroad to shape the narrative around the Chibok abduction to its advantage. Successful efforts to liberate some of the abducted girls involved international actors as well (Aina et al. 2019).

2.2. Bringing visibility to marginalised issues

Amplifying local grievances in asymmetrical political struggles

Digital technologies can amplify local grievances and traditional practices of resistance. Tactics that have been used for centuries by the seemingly "powerless" to exercise agency against colonial occupation, land grabs, violent conflicts and repressive laws are being revived to resist current-day oppression. For instance, in Uganda, women have used the traditional Acholi tactic of stripping naked to resist land evictions (Box 3). While effective in themselves, these practices can convey a deep cultural legitimacy and find strong resonance in their national context. Digital technologies can be purposefully used to amplify such cultural practices, bringing a new awareness to marginalised issues like rural land conflicts – including among a new generation of young, urban activists. In addition to broadening the support base and sensitising society, online platforms can provide spaces for richer exchanges between various women-led movements, helping them to link up for common causes.

Box 3. Women's use of traditional tactics to resist land evictions in Uganda

In the village of Apaa in northern Uganda, a private company (Madhvani Group) has sought to obtain land for commercial purposes since 2012. To resist eviction, sixty women undressed in front of the Local District Board and Madhvani Group representatives (Winfield 2020). This traditional Acholi tactic allows women to express distress and anger in extreme situations and "cast a spell" on their oppressors. It is also understood to evoke shame among those who watch. **By "harnessing the emotive power of shame", their struggle found strong cultural and historical resonance** in a district that has been subjected to repeated waves of enforced displacement during and after the British colonisation (Winfield 2020).

The Acholi women's undressing was **widely relayed both online and offline, giving their struggle nationwide visibility. This helped spark a larger resistance movement**, mobilising thousands of protestors in the surrounding communities. It also managed to keep the Madhvani Group off their land up to today (as of June 2022) by repeating the tactic in 2015 and 2017. However, such acts of resistance have not wholly prevented repression. In 2017, the Ugandan police used teargas and live bullets against protestors, and the Madhvani Group continues to try to acquire land in the district, with government support (Winfield 2020). In 2019, President Museveni set up a committee to investigate the Apaa land conflict, but no sustainable solution has yet been reached. Despite winning a court case, Madhavni has been unable to access the land due to ongoing community resistance (Abonga et al. 2019; Next Media Uganda 2021).

Moving the line between public and private

Most public institutions consider their role to be limited to governing the *public* sphere in a narrow sense. Because women's issues, perspectives and abilities are seen as pertaining to the private sphere in most African countries (and beyond), they remain largely excluded from political governance processes. Women activists are using digital technologies to push states to move the line between what is considered private and what is considered political. The notion that the personal is political was promoted and popularised by feminists, including by black feminists, especially in the United States (Nwakanma 2022). This use of the digital space to frame the personal as political has unearthed how experiences that might appear individual, unique and contextual, are in fact structural and hence shared by many who present the same gender, race, class or other identities. Hashtags that show how commonly women experience inequalities and gender-based violence – like #Metoo, but also #MenAreTrash and #JusticeForSharon in South Africa and Kenya, respectively (Box 4) – have helped redefine such challenges as societal problems, requiring societal and political change as opposed to personal accommodation (Washington and Marcus 2022).

Box 4. Twitter activism against gender-based violence in Kenya and South-Africa

In South Africa and Kenya, cases of femicide, sexual assault and violence against LGBTQI+ people have gained increasing visibility on social media over the years. In 2017 and 2018, respectively, the murders of 22-year-old South African Karabo Mokoena at the hands of her lover, a married father of three, and of Kenyan woman Sharon Otieno after she got pregnant by a famous politician, sparked outrage. According to Okech (2021), Twitter activists channelled the ensuing grief and rage to start successful social movements, using the hashtags #MenAreTrash in South Africa and #JusticeForSharon in Kenya. These fostered public awareness and debate around gender-based violence, and gained support from other feminist groups across physical divides. **Social media were also used as a mobilisation tool, to organise protests demanding political responses and state accountability**. In South Africa, this led to the 2018 Total Shutdown, a series of marches that forced President Cyril Ramaphosa to receive a memorandum from the protestors in person (Okech 2021). The mobilisation in South Africa played a role in inspiring the strategies of Kenyan feminist activists following Sharon's murder, again demonstrating how transnational feminist networks can use online platforms to support and reinforce each other.

The fact that platforms like Twitter do not "filter out" women's voices the way society does, even when their expression is deemed less socially acceptable, creates a space of resistance against the prevalent normalisation of violence against particular identities. While the social media space does not insulate women from the backlash they can face online and offline for their activism, having space online helps those who can make use of digital tools to engage on broader political and governance-related topics affecting their lives.

2.3. Mobilising societies towards reform

Sensitising society and policymakers

By being visible online and carving out spaces for new discussions reflecting more diverse viewpoints, women are **gradually normalising these conversations as part of the public debate** (Lewis et al. 2013; Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021). This can take various forms, including online discussions and hashtags that gain steam and reach a wide audience, eventually being picked up by mainstream media and integrated into everyday dialogue. Online conversations and effective social media campaigns can make society readier to accept reform. They can also bring opportune moments for governments to propose changes – or dissuade them from reneging on progress

made. In general terms a critical mass of the population needs to push for change in order for reform to gain ground. However, in some cases it can be enough to have **a tightly knit core group of activists with high visibility, flanked by a cluster of high-profile yet less active supporters, followers and sympathisers**. Social media seems conducive to this structure, thanks to the broad exposure it can confer to a few people and the ease of getting large numbers of subscribers. But this assumes that a substantial and diverse segment of the population is online and exposed to some form of digital activism.

Digital technologies can **push conversations on gender equality into the "mainstream"**, helping to shape a more conducive societal context for reforms. According to Lewis et al. (2013), this can happen even if online content is not explicitly feminist. In Tunisia, cyber-activism has been backed by a dynamic civil society that has had more freedom and space for advocacy since the Arab Spring. This has helped promote the views of women's movements, and was arguably a factor in policy changes such as the revision of the Constitution to define women and men as "equal" rather than "complementary" and requiring parity in electoral lists (Moghadam 2019). Although societal attitudes and perceptions have not evolved at the same pace (causing challenges in implementing the reforms), societal backlash against gender equality reforms has not been strong enough to prevent them. This is likely because **society has become, if not overall supportive, more attuned to these ideas**.

Women leading broader political movements

Women have played a major role in political movements in Africa. There are many historical examples of this, as well as recent examples of women mobilising digital technologies for political and societal change. Women played a key role in the revolutionary struggles in Sudan, and in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, as well as in Nigeria's #ENDSARS protests (Box 5). In these cases, female organisers utilised the potential of digital technologies to support their goals.

Box 5. The Feminist Coalition and female activists: Leading and sustaining #ENDSARS

In 2020, non-violent protests swelled against the brutality and human rights violations routinely committed by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) – primarily against the youth. A nationwide movement formed, calling for institutional reforms of police and security, governance and public services. The #ENDSARS hashtag, with photos and videos of police violence, went viral and gained the support of celebrities and politicians. At the same time, masses of Nigerians took to the streets. The pressure led the Nigerian government to dissolve SARS. However, the continuing protests for governance reforms were brutally repressed, for instance, with the "Lekki massacre" on 20 October (Nwakanma 2022). Whereas more than 85% of #ENDSARS protests were peaceful, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED 2021) recorded "nearly 100 events of violence targeting civilians perpetrated by state forces in 2020 alone". Despite global support for #ENDSARS, it remains unclear whether it will achieve lasting police and broader governance reforms.

Against this backdrop, the **Feminist Coalition** was formed to promote "a Nigeria where equality for all people is a reality in our laws and everyday lives". Its members are 14 women experienced in digital technologies, grassroots and feminist activism, and non-profit work. Leveraging their social networks and expertise in political organising to support #ENDSARS, the coalition has mobilised activists and wider supporters online and offline and raised funds, including in cryptocurrencies (Nwakanma 2022). It has kept the movement going and helped extend its advocacy to broader governance concerns, while also supporting protesters, including victims of police violence (Amaize 2021).

According to some, the coalition and wider #ENDSARS movement succeeded in putting feminism in a positive light and highlighting its Black African roots and ownership, countering the negative connotation it often has in Nigeria and the tendency

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> to attribute it to Western ideologies. Indeed, the organisers' language and demands borrowed concepts from Black feminist theories, like intersectionality and the need for centring the most vulnerable in social justice struggles (Nwakanma 2022).

Taking part in movements for political change can empower women. In addition to expanding their skills in coalition-building, advocacy and online activism, women who lead and participate in activism can gain extensive networks and visibility. They may find forms of personal empowerment as well, such as the ability to renegotiate gender roles within and outside the household (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021; Aina et al. 2019). Moreover, by participating in social movements, women as a collective demonstrate their leadership capabilities to the general public. However, the potential for women's empowerment through their participation in political and governance movements should not be overstated, as it may be hard to sustain in the long term if patriarchal attitudes and institutions persist.

Section three discusses this and other obstacles to women's engagement in political, governance and feminist movements and the limitations and risks of digital technologies therein.

# 3. Limitations and risks of digital technologies

3.1. Gender and the digital divide in Africa

While digital technologies can help women overcome some of the challenges they face in political engagement, only a fraction of women in Africa enjoy access to technology and can tap into this potential. This is not to say that with internet access most women in Africa would turn to activism. However, we cannot overlook the social and gendered factors that underlie unequal access to digital technology in Africa and elsewhere. These include socio-economic status, educational level, language and place of residence (especially urban versus rural). Strikingly, some 50% of the urban population in Africa uses the internet versus just 15% of the rural population (ITU 2021). With important variations within and between countries, the overall picture in Africa is that of a pervasive digital divide.[7]

Gender is a major line of cleavage in the digital divide (Schelenz and Schopp 2018). In 2020, 24% of African women had some access to the internet, compared to 35% of men (ITU 2021). Gender gaps in mobile device ownership and mobile internet use are especially pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, and remained largely unchanged from 2018 to 2020 (see Figure 1) (GSMA 2021). Yet, the disparity in *access* to digital technologies and the internet does not tell the whole story, as wider *usage* discrepancies exist, dependent on several factors alongside gender. For instance, in Zimbabwe, only 12% of the population had access to the internet in 2017 – and those who did were mainly urban men with enough money and time to spend at internet cafés. Due to the repressive nature of the Zimbabwean regime, very few of even this small group used the internet for activism (Chiweshe 2017).

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[7]   In 2018, mobile connections were estimated at 82%, but the proportion of internet users at 34%, with social media users making up only 15% (Schelenz and Schopp 2018).

Figure 1. Regional gender gaps in mobile device ownership (top) and internet use (bottom), 2018-2020[8]

Gender gap in mobile internet use (%)

Gender gap in mobile ownership (%)
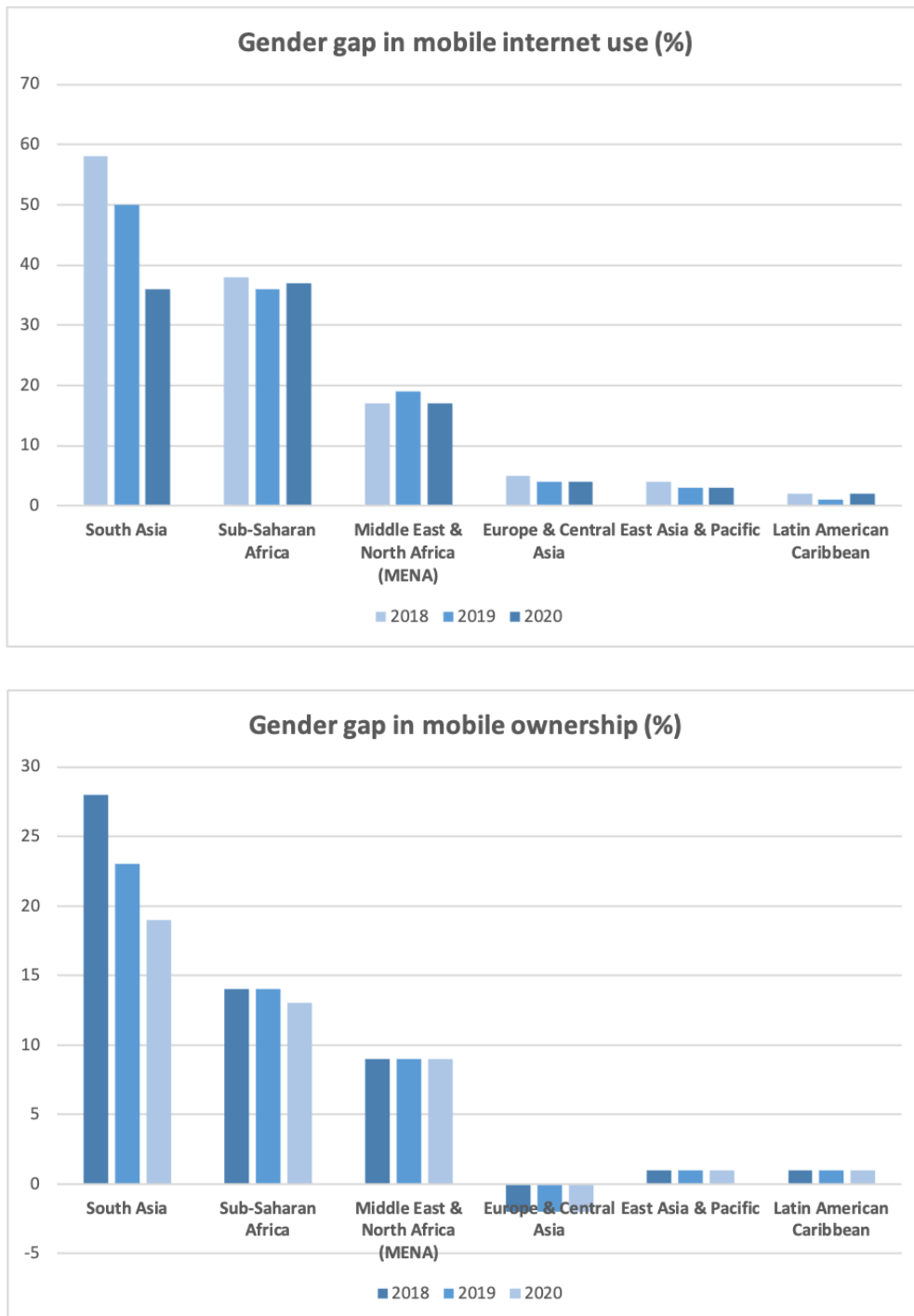
Source: GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021.

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[8]   Negative figures indicate a gender gap in favour of women, meaning that more women own mobile devices than men in Europe and Central Asia.

Social, economic and cultural barriers can limit women's access to digital technologies. Chief among these are cost, illiteracy,[9] lack of digital skills and lack of fluency in languages like English and French. Certainly, men experience these barriers too; but women face them in addition to obstacles rooted in patriarchy. Misconceptions around ownership and use of digital devices include social perceptions of the internet as an unsafe space and inappropriate for women and girls (Jadoin Léveillée 2021). A study in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Rwanda found that both men and women tended to see the internet, and especially social media, as a "threat to relationships", due to jealousy and fears that they might lead people to be unfaithful. Some men reported feeling uncomfortable about their partner using social media, and some women feared their partner's reaction if they used it (Chair 2017). These attitudes can lead to restrictions, like in rural Mozambique where women may require authorisation and supervision from a male family member to access a phone (EU 2020). More broadly, public facilities that offer digital services, like internet cafés, have traditionally been male-only spaces and therefore feel "uncomfortable, unwelcoming or even prohibited" for women and girls (Web Foundation 2015). Thus, the digital gender divide compounds the many other divides and inequalities that exist, starting with but not limited to lack of economic resources.

Several of the women-led political movements that have achieved high visibility online have been led by relatively wealthy, well-connected urban women.[10] These female online activists may tend not to use **local languages** – for reasons including the desire to connect with international networks. However, this makes their content less accessible to women in their own country (AWiM21 2022). Because rural women from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less access to digital technologies and online social media, **their perspectives and problems are underrepresented in online fora**. Urban, linguistic and social-class biases have led to female online activists being described as "disconnected" from the challenges and experiences of most women – though this argument should not be used to dismiss their demands and activism wholesale.

The disconnect attributed to some online activists, women and others makes alliances with grassroots actors more difficult to achieve, despite the demonstrated value of coalitions in effecting meaningful political change (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021). More broadly, the lack of unity across women-led movements, due to differing views about objectives, priorities and strategies, for instance, continues to be a major challenge preventing these movements from achieving greater impact (Aina et al. 2019). In Nigeria, for example, few instances can be found of alliances between activists across generations, classes, religions, ethnicities and political affiliations in recent years. Religious and ethnic cleavages have been exacerbated by opportunistic political actors (Aina et al. 2019). In the midst of the #BBOG movement, for instance, the "Return Our Girls" hashtag was created to reframe the #BBOG message, demanding the same objective – that the abducted girls be returned – but shifting the responsibility away from the President and his government to the abductors themselves (Aina et al. 2019). Bridging urban/rural and class gaps in the use of digital technologies can be a first step towards building alliances between women-led movements, to cooperate and align objectives whenever possible, without giving into the pressure to "speak with one voice", as women's experiences and positions are heterogeneous and diverse.

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9   Female adult literacy averaged 41% in 2018 in the countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
10   For instance, the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria was led by relatively privileged women with advanced education, socio-political connections, and organising and digital skills. They could also afford to turn away international donor funding to remain fully independent (Aina et al. 2019).

3.2. Enduring patriarchal attitudes and systemic, intersecting inequalities

Backlash against women's engagement

Online political engagement can help women overcome gender barriers, organise collectively and normalise the presence of women's voices in the public sphere, leading to more representative political cultures (Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro 2020). However, online platforms – globally and in Africa – are increasingly replete with gendered harassment and backlash. In 2020, one in three internet-using women in Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda and South Africa reported experiencing **online gender-based violence**,[11] of which more than 35% was sexual harassment (Iyer et al. 2020). Threats and intimidation, (sexual) harassment and stalking are all part of this, in addition to degrading stereotypes and misinformation, which should be understood as forms of verbal, symbolic or psychological violence. These perpetuate the notion that women should not engage in public and political debates and shame them for doing so. African diaspora women working in the media and in politics also face significant harassment online.[12]

Alongside personal testimonies,[13] there is evidence that **due to structural flaws, policies and institutions fail to punish and deter gender-based violence online, enabling it to continue. Lack of data** on new forms of harassment of women online, such as non-consensual distribution of intimate images, hampers effective policy solutions and advocacy by gender rights groups (Olofintuade 2020). Data on online aggression against LGBTQI+ people is similarly largely absent, in part because reporting such aggression may put victims/survivors at greater risk of violence in societies that **criminalise homosexuality and transsexuality** (Jadoin Léveillée 2021). These problems are compounded by challenges like the inability of LGBTQI+ groupings to register and obtain legal status as an organisation (Armisen 2016).

Laws that address the specific forms of gender-based violence taking place online and in-country reporting mechanisms are still lacking in many countries including in Africa (CIPESA 2022). Where they do exist, laws are often insufficient to protect victims/survivors, provide them psycho-social support and compensation, and criminalise online sexual offenders (Box 6). Nonetheless, some countries are making progress. For instance, South Africa's Domestic Violence Amendment Act adopted in January 2022 encompasses various forms of online harassment and abuse, including the sharing of non-consensual manipulated, deep fakes, doxing, deadnaming or outing[14] and digital stalking (Power 2022).

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[11] CSOs such as the Women in Uganda Network (WOUGNET) tend to adopt a broad definition of online gender-based violence encompassing "non-consensual intimate images, cyberbullying, online sexual harassment, doxing [collecting materials about a person for the purpose of publishing them without their consent], cyberstalking, and impersonation" (Pollicy 2021).

[12] As shown by a 2017 survey of several millions of tweets received by 778 journalists and politicians from the US and the UK. The study found that black women were 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets than white women (Amnesty International 2017).

[13] In one testimony shared online, a woman was outed as a lesbian without her consent and subsequently received online threats of being reported to the police (Olofintuade 2020). See more testimonies at African Feminism Platform

[14] Deadnaming and outing refer to, respectively, the acts of revealing a transgender or non-binary person's former name without their consent, and revealing a non-cisgender, non-heterosexual person's gender identity or sexual orientation without their consent.

> **Box 6. Problematic state responses to online gender-based violence in Uganda and Nigeria**
>
> **Nigeria's 2015 Cybercrimes Act** aimed to comprehensively prohibit, prevent, detect, prosecute and punish cybercrimes in Nigeria, and introduced some key measures to outlaw and punish cyber-stalking, cyberbullying and the "distribution of racially or ethnically prejudicial or violent material through a computer system or network" (Safe Online Nigeria 2015). However, the Act has some **loopholes that fail to account for certain forms of harassment women face online**, for instance when intimate photos or disinformation about them is sent between two or more individuals via direct phone messages without their consent. The Act only criminalises computer distribution and the direct publishing of abusive content on online platforms, not the circulation of this content between two individuals (Olofintuade 2020b).
>
> In Uganda, the **2014 Anti-Pornography Act** introduced measures to criminalise the production, trafficking and circulation of pornography, including "the sharing of nude materials on computers, phones and television". Article 13 in particular, prohibits the production of pornography and sanctions it with a fine and imprisonment which can go up to ten years (Anti-Pornography Act 2014). However, in several cases, this article has been used to arrest, prosecute and in some cases imprison[15] women victims of non-consensual distribution of intimate images online. The wording of the Act was interpreted to **shame victims/survivors** instead of perpetrators of online violence (Lirri 2020). In August 2021, certain provisions of the Act were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Uganda (Article 19 2021).[16]

Women in politics, journalism or political activism online seem particularly targeted by online violence, as well as feminist activists because they directly challenge the gender status quo in society. This trend seems to stem partly from a desire to **discipline women** to pressure them to exhibit a specific version of femininity (APC 2019; Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2020). Violence may be presented as acceptable against the "rogue" women who run for elections; while "poor", "rural" and "innocent" women are presented as in need of protection (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2020). Such uses of **stereotypes as well as mis- and disinformation** can work to discredit women who are politically engaged, partake in activism or work as journalists (Di Meco and Wilfore 2021). Digital technologies facilitate these effects by providing **new systems of surveillance** that family members, intimate partners and others can use to monitor women's actions online and offline. These instruments are used not only to sanction politically active women but also to dissuade other women from engaging more, thereby reinforcing women's **self-censorship** in political action (Pollicy 2021). While backlash is not novel – as women are exposed to it in their offline mobilisation too – it can be amplified by digitalisation and by the ease of access to information and actors (e.g., women activists).

Digital technologies can be used for different purposes, both "good" and "bad", as long as users abide by platform rules or are undetected. These technologies have therefore become **instrumental in mobilisation of reactionary movements**, including on gender issues. Anti-gender actors use social media to disseminate alternative information, lobby institutions and politicians, organise protests, and target and silence pro-gender equality actors (Washington and Marcus 2022; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and EuroMedRights 2019). For instance, organised "incels" and the "manosphere" (men's groups that express toxicity towards women online) often adopt the same codes as women-led collective action, like hashtag activism, lobbying and "educational" videos, to push back against gender equality and spread degrading messages about women (Washington and Marcus 2022). Radical Islamist movements like ISIS have also made use of social media to publicise their actions, disseminate propaganda and recruit fighters, particularly in Europe (Vermeersch et al. 2020). In doing so, they have often employed arguments rooted in gender

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[15] For instance, in 2018, a university student in 2018 was charged with producing and broadcasting pornography according to article 13 and sentenced to prison (Lirri 2020).

[16] They were ruled by the Court as "ambiguous and vague leave room for inconsistent application" and a "limitation of freedom of expression that did not serve a legitimate aim".

norms to appeal to young women and men; for instance, calling on women to help build the caliphate as mothers and wives of male fighters (EP 2017). Violent extremist groups have made inroads in online recruitment at the local level in some African countries, like Tunisia, Sudan and Kenya, though in most of sub-Saharan Africa these groups more frequently operate via direct recruitment, in part due to low internet penetration (UNDP 2017). Still, there is a risk of this increasing as the digital divide recedes. Indeed, in Mali, there is evidence that Katiba Macina and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) use WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram to attract fighters and portray suicide bombers as heroes. In one example, they posted photographs of the suicide bombers in the 2018 Timbuktu Airport attack (Vermeersch et al. 2020).

The types of barriers women face online continue to reflect those they face offline, being rooted in patriarchal attitudes and systems. A 2019 study found that women's grassroots groups in Osun state, Nigeria, tended not to engage in formal politics because of violence, laws unfavourable for participation in politics, illiteracy and lack of support from men (Orisadare 2019). In the 2018 Zimbabwean elections, women candidates, like Grace Mugabe, became targets of online verbal and sexual violence (Mateveke and Shikafa-Chipiro 2020). In addition, any discussions they were involved in were reduced to their gender instead of their political programmes. Such deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes help explain why, when measures are taken to protect online users from violence, they are not necessarily implemented or effective (Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro 2020). This is not to say that attitudes are fixed and cannot evolve, but rather that such change is a long-term process in which digital technologies are but one factor, and not necessarily the determinant one, depending on the context.

Another stereotype used to discredit women and their needs online is their **depiction as overly emotional and attached to "trivial issues"** (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021). For instance, in Ethiopia, demands for increased women's participation have been written off as "bourgeois" feminism, detached from reality and at odds with the struggles of rural Ethiopian women (Ford 2021). These perceptions arose in a context where women hold 50% of cabinet positions, though enormous gender inequalities persist, including in literacy and digital access (Ford 2021; Meseret 2018).[17] Another example is Uganda, where despite the success of the Pads4Girls social media campaign, the government has refused to devote time and resources to the problem of menstrual poverty. The campaign reached mainstream media, gaining the support of women from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, who became active in collecting sanitary pads and raising funds. During his election campaign, President Museveni promised to provide more menstrual hygiene products for girls in schools. After the vote, however, he reneged, stating that public funds were lacking. The government then ordered the Pads4Girls campaign to stop. Stella Nyanzi, who led the campaign – alongside her vocal engagement on freedom of expression, human rights, gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights in Uganda – was arrested while the Pads4Girls campaign was ongoing, with the police citing her criticisms of government as justification (Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro 2020; Slawson 2017).

Global power inequalities playing against African women's online engagement

The ways digital technologies function impact the ability of African women-led movements to use them. Functionality aspects also influence the types of exchanges that prevail in the digital space. A major factor is that social media platforms are for-profit entities with private shareholders. Their infrastructure is based on user engagement mediated by algorithms. The governance of tech companies and the tech sector (i.e. *who* makes decisions and their positionality) reveals global power inequalities rooted in patriarchal and colonial legacies. These can be amplified online, to the detriment of African women's political engagement.

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[17] A 2021 survey found that 53% of Ethiopian women aged 22 or younger had never used a smartphone, compared to 38% of young men.

The most used digital technologies today, especially online platforms, **tend to reproduce historical biases against women, non-whites and non-Western individuals, as well as other minorities**. The **algorithms** that power most social media platforms function by looking to the past to determine present responses, which amounts to reinforcing existing preferences. By repeating intersectional patterns of discrimination, they risk exacerbating discriminatory gaps – and in fact have been proven to do so in several cases. For instance, Newberry and Sehl (2021) found that Twitter algorithms reproduced racial bias, making posts – including those reflecting political engagement – by African women less visible (Newberry and Sehl 2021). Other issues include the low visibility of accounts that diverge from Western beauty standards (especially on image-oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok). There are even reports of "shadow banning" female influencers who address political and societal issues as opposed to cooking or fashion (i.e., deliberately making them invisible to users) (CFFP 2022). While the content moderation policies of social media platforms like Facebook have made some progress in detecting and cracking down on racist content, they continue to fail to detect much of the misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic hate speech. In addition, algorithms used by social media platforms expose users to content that reinforces the views they already hold, filtering out diverging content (GCF Global N.d.). This leads to increasingly polarised opinions and fuels gendered misinformation online.

Tech companies **collect and monetise personal data on users.** In doing so, they seek to categorise users, including by making assumptions about their gender identity. This may further entrench binary notions of women and men, and the norm of heterosexuality, as opposed to the sexual and gender fluidity promoted by many feminist and gender rights activists. Even social media platforms that enable users to self-identify outside binary categories still sell data and base advertisements on criteria such as male/female (Diepeveen 2022).[18] **Online advertisements**, which increase platforms' profits, tend to objectify and sexualise women, often promoting stereotypical forms of femininity and masculinity rooted in prevalent gender norms (ASA 2022).

It is no coincidence, then, that digital technologies reproduce certain inequalities. Indeed, the founders of the most prevalent digital technologies and online platforms today are predominantly white American men. They do not necessarily take the trouble to **consult and involve a diversity of engineers and consumers in the design of digital tools**. By virtue of their positionality as white American men, they are not impelled by their own experience to consider risks of bias and discrimination. Without a conscious effort, they fail to take these risks and biases into account. Some recent efforts have been made to introduce **gender, racial and geographic diversity** in tech company management and supervisory structures. However, there is still a lack of systematic, built-in and transparent mechanisms to ensure that digital technologies do not reinforce systemic bias against already marginalised people (CFFP 2022).

The considerable profits that tech companies make give them and their owners undue power, enabling them to influence online conversations and social movements. For instance, in October 2020, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey gave a substantial boost to the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria when he tweeted a call for bitcoin donations to be made to the Feminist Coalition (after its bank account had been closed by the authorities). His intervention helped the Coalition raise US $150,000 in bitcoin and is even considered to have "inadvertently selected the leaders of Nigeria's social movement against police brutality" (i.e., the Coalition) (Amaize 2021). At the same time, **digital technologies can provide marginalised voices a platform** to denounce biases and omissions in mainstream media (Box 7).

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[18]   Some social media like Facebook insist on the principle of "one person one account", which allows them to collect identifiers about their users which is valuable data, on grounds of favouring authenticity. But this comes with the drawback of preventing the creation of fictional or changing identities which have been shown to help African women keep their activism out of the eye of their relatives to avoid direct backlash, for instance (Diepeveen 2022).

Tech companies' clout allows them to **shape discourse in centres of decision-making**, such as Washington DC and Brussels. They spend lavishly on lobbying to ensure that digital policies in the make do not compromise their marketing interests; while African CSOs – let alone individual political activists – seldom have the finances to do so (CFFP 2022). African perspectives, values and political aspirations, and the problems of certain regions, communities, identities and languages, therefore tend to be lost in an online stratosphere "flooded" by more mainstream economic and political interests. Digital technologies **privilege some values and ideologies over others**. They function according to capitalistic and libertarian principles – as exemplified by their reliance on ads and the marketisation of personal data. They favour profit-making above, for example, social and environmental justice, privacy rights, community care and gender equality (Mateveke and Chifaka-Chipiro 2020; CFFP 2022). Their content tends to promote economic liberalism, consumerism, normative notions of democratic values and individualism, while drowning out voices for collective action. This disproportionally impacts people from lower socio-economic classes, those living in rural areas, women, and sexual and gender minorities (CFFP 2022).

Beyond the values around which digital technologies and online platforms are designed, the **information they disseminate matters** in shaping people's political views and likelihood of political engagement on certain topics. They can make certain issues seem less "serious", important and worthy of activism. Africans, and especially African women,[19] have less influence over the type of information that is circulated online, which (again) often derives from White, Western and male-dominated media industries (WACC 2021). Some digital media entrepreneurs are working to attenuate this imbalance by producing and disseminating Africa-based knowledge and media content. However, in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, only 13% of those entrepreneurs were women (Warner at al. 2021).

The problem of unequal knowledge production and dissemination online extends to academia. Research on the use of digital technologies for political purposes in Africa is still in its early stages. **Scholarship on political protests in Africa is gendered and tends to criminalise young men**, assuming that only they resort to violence to defend political and governance aspirations, both on the streets and online (Okech 2017). Men are viewed as much more likely to gather in street protests, despite ample proof of women's engagement. The "youth", who are the main users of digital technologies, especially social media, are often equated with young men, implicitly excluding women of similar age, especially those who are married and have children. Similarly, "gender" is often equated with women, which contributes to victimising women and "invisibilising" peaceful masculinities (UNOY 2017).

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[19]   For instance, in 2015, women made up only 9% of holders of senior management roles in the telecom industry in Africa, though hopefully the situation has improved since (AfDB 2015).

Lastly, the system of **"international development"** – in which (primarily Western) governments provide developing countries official development assistance, preferential loans and technical assistance – may depoliticise the fight for gender equality in Africa. It might even have the effect of side-lining grassroots African CSOs in favour of international NGOs. Indeed, the predominance of international NGOs in the promotion of gender equality has had unintended consequences, including reportedly, a focus on public relations over impact, a tendency for gender equality objectives to become box-ticking exercises, and attracting young African professionals away from fights for political change to work at NGOs instead (Al-Karib 2018). In countries where grassroots organisations must compete with international NGOs for funding, the latter have a much greater ability to invest in digital technologies and communicate their activities online. The visibility they gain risks pulling attention away from African political, feminist and women's rights activists.

3.3. Side-lining women and gender equality

Women have asserted themselves as backbones or leaders in several recent protest movements, for instance in Nigeria, Egypt and Sudan. Their activity and visibility in these protests have **to some extent** been **enabled and amplified by digital technologies, especially social media**. On online platforms, women are often portrayed as "mothers" of the revolution or the nation and applauded for their engagement.

However, these portrayals are ambiguous, simultaneously lauding women's participation and leadership and perpetuating gender stereotypes that highlight the exceptionality of women's public presence, as shown by the qualification "mothers". More importantly, women are often **excluded from influential political positions and leadership once political movements or peace processes become formalised**, despite their active participation in political activism and even combat. There have been several instances of this. During Eritrea's war of independence from Ethiopia, women made up a third of the fighting force, holding positions at all levels of the military. Yet, following independence, they were stigmatised for having taken part in combat, rejected by family, seen as unfeminine and unfit for marriage, and their social, economic and political rights were eroded. Strikingly, no woman was part of the high-level negotiations with Ethiopia in June 2019, ahead of the landmark peace agreement (Kidan 2019). The same was apparent during Egypt's Arab Spring and in Sudan. In both countries, women often formed the majority in demonstrations and were prominent among movement leaders. But following the revolution they remained largely excluded from the political sphere (Box 8). Despite their engagement, women were apparently still not seen as legitimate politicians.

Box 8. Women's short-lived glory in Sudan's 2018-19 revolution

From December 2018 to August 2019, Sudanese citizens took to the streets calling for President Omar-al-Bashir's departure after 30 years in power. The revolution ended in 2019 with a political agreement between the Coalition of Freedom and Change – an alliance of professional organisations that led mass strikes and neighbourhood resistance committees – and the military, which had violently repressed earlier protests in June of 2018 and deposed the president in a coup on 11 April 2019. **Social media played an important role** in organising and sustaining the protests and mobilising supporters via hashtags (#TasgotBas, meaning "#FallThatIsAll", an injunction for the regime to fall) and with online showcases of politically engaged art, among others. Digital technologies were also instrumental in mobilising diaspora support and in fundraising (Nugdalla 2020).

Women were looked to as leaders, contributors, representatives and symbols of the revolution. They played a key role in organising protests and many participated in them, despite the risk of sexual assault and harassment by security officials, condoned to discourage or "punish" them (African Studies Centre 2020; Tønnessen 2020). Images of female protestors went viral online, helping to sustain the movement. Some became powerful symbols of the revolution, such as a picture of Alaa Salah standing before a chanting crowd (Alkahir 2019). Such figures evoked references to the country's queens (the *kandaka)* of the ancient Kingdom of Kush (Nugdalla 2020).

Women from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, religions and ethnicities came together to oppose the Al-Bashir regime, giving visibility to women from marginalised regions (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2020). While female protesters did not necessarily identify with overtly feminist discourse (Alkahir 2019), there was a general sense that among the problems affecting the country, in addition to corruption and lack of democracy, women were disproportionately affected by Al-Bashir's conservative public morality and family laws. For instance, they were not allowed to work without a man's permission. Therefore, many women believed they would gain from being included in the transition process and in politics more broadly (Tønnessen 2020).

Improvements followed the revolution, including repeal of rules on women's clothing, and four female ministers were appointed (Tønnessen 2020). However, **women and marginalised groups were side-lined and largely underrepresented** in the transition negotiations and the post-revolution cabinet and local governments (Alkahir 2019). Some felt betrayed (Schipani 2021). The Sudan Women for Change organisation lamented that their portrayal as heroes of the revolution had not brought significant political improvements (Nugdalla 2020). Since the October 2021 military coup, former revolutionary figures like Alaa Salah have expressed fear of a reversal of the revolution's few hard-earned women's rights improvements (Schipani 2021).

Gender-related grievances are often deprioritised or made invisible **in the name of patriotism** once social and political movements become formalised. Women join these movements to support their overall objectives, but they also bring their own grievances, related for example, to gender, social class and place of residence. Movements may end, however, with only **minor, symbolic or slow changes towards addressing women's and gender-specific grievances, or advancing women in decision-making**. In a number of African countries, this tendency (which is not unique to Africa) has manifested since the colonial and post-colonial period. Women played important roles in independence and democratisation movements, and once formalised, many of the new governments expressed a commitment to gender equality and women's rights. Underpinning this "state feminism" is the understanding that countries, especially democracies, should promote women's advancement (Mazur and McBride 2010). However, outcomes have been uneven in terms of impactful policy reforms towards this goal. In several countries, women's unions and liberation movements were integrated in official government structures in charge of women's rights but devoid of significant ambitions or means (e.g., women's ministries, bureaus, national councils). This integration

process effectively depoliticised some major women's rights advocates and organisations. It is even argued that in certain cases, like Nigeria in the 1990s, it led to a form of "femocracy", whereby women-dedicated government structures claimed to represent a majority of women and defend their rights but did not do so in practice because they were run by a small clique of elite women (Mama 1995).

Autocratic countries have also been known to co-opt women's rights organisations to improve their international credentials and appear more democratic (Bjårnegard and Zatterberg 2022). In Tunisia, for instance, state feminism started with President Bourguiba (1957-1987), who officially supported gender equality and enacted major reforms like the Code of Personal Status, which granted women divorce and reproductive rights. Yet, women remained underrepresented in politics, with women in the official state party confined to roles with limited decision-making power. One women's union, the *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne* (UNFT), was given a prominent role, while other women's organisations had limited freedom. But the UNFT was sponsored and controlled by the state and served more as a façade than to advance significant gender equality reforms (Irakoze 2020). In the current context of democratic recession under President Kais Saied, Najla Bouden Romdhane was appointed as Tunisia's first female prime minister. Yet, she has little significant power, as Saied has granted himself the right to rule by decree with all power concentrated in his hands, including the power to review the Constitution and appoint government ministers (Decree 117; Holleis et al. 2021; Ben Said 2021).

In other words, there is a tendency towards women playing key roles as inspiring figures and activists – at great risk to their own safety – in the early days of movements, but then becoming increasingly side-lined, without meaningful, concrete recognition or benefits in the aftermath. Whether deliberate or because of power dynamics and prevailing cultural norms, **women's participation is capitalised on with little reward for them**. In some cases, political movements have instrumentalised women's participation (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al. 2021).

However, there are strategies and practices to counter this, some utilising digital technologies to unlock women's potential.

4. Digital technologies in support of women-led political activism

4.1. Engage with diverse views, movements and marginalised communities

Actively engage with a diverse set of women-led movements

Making the best use of the bridge-building power of digital technologies requires **connecting and engaging with a diversity of women-led and feminist movements**. This means, first, recognising that women are a heterogeneous group and that women's movements and other women-led political movements reflect different policy stances. These groups may be rural or urban-based, feminist, LGBTQI+ rights advocates, religious organisations, or focused on social justice more broadly. Based on their experiences, political views and economic positions, women-led organisations may push for certain governance reforms and gender equality measures without necessarily taking explicitly feminist or political stances. Therefore, the gendered aspects of political activism and digitalisation need to be approached in an intersectional way.

Women-led movements can reinforce one another by building coalitions around a set of broad common goals and use digital technologies to support these goals. This allows activists to **pool resources**, which is another way to bolster women's organisations and women-led political movements, as they often lack funding. Small organisations in rural communities have particular difficulty in accessing international funding. Donors can support such efforts by directing their funding to networks and coalitions or to organisations that are open to coalition-building. For the organisations themselves, building alliances does not mean that each loses their core focus and essence, but rather that they show flexibility as to the common message they adopt within the coalition or network. Building alliances among women-led political movements and CSOs is particularly important to counteract the growing power of states and the private sector, as well as the other socio-cultural movements that may seek to block women's rights and ability to contribute to public life (Paradigm Initiative 2020).

Digital technologies' potential to connect diverse women-led political movements from the local to the transnational level, and from specific to broad issues, should be capitalised on to the greatest extent possible. Disunity between women-led movements is a major barrier preventing them from scaling up their actions and making a broader societal impact. Digital technologies, if accessible and deployable, can also help connect specific issues to broader grievances, sustaining women-led movements over time. In various cases, online platforms have enabled what started out as localised protests to spread and reach national and even international visibility. An example is a video of the Sudanese female protestor Alaa Salah that flooded social media during the Sudanese revolution, helping the movement reach international audiences.

Actively combat the digital divide

The digital divide, including intersecting inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies according to gender, ethnicity, native language, educational level, socio-economic background and geographic location **must be systematically considered** in efforts to support women-led political movements. Indeed, in our research the digital divide stood out as a primary challenge in exploiting the full potential of digital technologies, particularly among women-led political movements beyond large urban centres and a certain class of women.

Therefore, **seeking representation across identity groups within women-led political movements, women's organisations and feminist organisations is key.** This should aim especially to counter the tendency among national and international actors (e.g., donors) to engage with women-led and feminist groups as a "box-ticking" exercise. Real support requires an intersectional understanding of who is representing a cause and inclusivity of women's organisations across age, socio-economic, religious and other identity lines.

Various women-led, feminist and other organisations are working to **address the digital gender divide, by providing training in digital skills and literacy**, among other measures. For instance, the African Centre for Women and ICT in Kenya trains rural women who have never used digital technology, expanding their digital literacy as well as life skills (Joppart 2020). Integrating digital skills in public education programmes can enable more citizens to benefit from new technologies. These efforts can be coupled with specialised training for women aspiring to engage politically via digital technologies, for instance, providing advice on developing social media strategies (e.g., identifying target audiences and developing strong messaging), organising online campaigns, using crowdfunding or other forms of online fundraising, and hashtag activism (Loiseau and Nowacka 2015). To address the safety concerns that discourage many women from using digital technologies for political or gender equality activism, tools can be provided to help women preserve their privacy and digital security, such as information on virtual private networks (VPNs) and navigating cookies to protect data privacy (WISP 2022).

However, such training should be well targeted, based on **needs expressed by women activists** rather than assumptions that women's organisations and women-led movements automatically need such capacity-building. Indeed, one consequence of the "NGOisation" of the fight for gender equality in Africa discussed earlier is a strong focus on "capacity building" for women's organisations and women leaders. For instance, Africa Barometer reported that in 2021, among 80 identified CSOs working on women's political participation in Africa, most included capacity building for female politicians as one of their main actions (others were lobbying for electoral reform and monitoring elections) (Morna et al. 2021). While working on capacity building is not problematic in itself, it can bypass the structural causes of women's exclusion from politics. **It is also often based on the faulty assumption that African women and CSOs need capacity building by default, whereas they are most aware of the political and gender challenges they face in their own context** (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2020).

It is also worth keeping in mind that digital training by itself is not enough to increase women's online activism if the in-country digital infrastructure is weak and data and telephones are hard to access due to cost. Therefore, **technical support needs to be supplemented with public investment in digital infrastructure and technological investment** in tools that allow women to mobilise even when they live in contexts with no, limited or slow internet.

Actively resist the "echo chamber" effect

Individuals, organisations and policymakers should proactively work against the effect of online "echo chambers". The "echo chamber" challenge is not unique to women activists; it characterises how access to online information is organised. However, as read earlier, it affects women in particular ways. For example, feminist activists and women-led political movements especially struggle to reach a wider support base, making it harder for them to contribute to change beyond their own bubble. Limited reach also prevents them from accessing broader information, thereby hampering strategising based on an accurate depiction of the wider environment they operate in. Possible solutions to break out of the "echo chamber" include **purposely searching for alternative views** to diversify one's bubble. **Partnering with organisations** familiar with engaging with diverging and even opposite views online is also desirable, if constructive engagement is possible.

The echo chamber also plays into divides existing across the spectrum of feminist movements. Indeed, the feminist movement at large has long been divided between, for example, liberal feminists, Marxist feminists and post-colonial feminists. These latter have called out many Western feminist movements (so-called "White feminism") for overlooking the perspectives of African and other non-Western women (Zakaria 2021). Online echo chambers reinforce the tendency for these different strands of feminism to work in parallel, neglecting one another's viewpoints and standing in the way of broader online coalitions. Resisting online echo chambers requires proactive effort to reverse this trend and build feminist unity by **better accounting for the perspectives of Africans – and/or other minorities – on feminism and women's rights**.

4.2. Combine tactics for more impact

Embed political activism in cultural contexts and traditional practices

In multiple instances, women-led and feminist activism has gained influence by **using traditional and culturally embedded practices** that resonate within the local or national context, amplified by digital technologies. Centuries-old tactics of resistance can thus be revived to resist current-day oppression. A clear example is the Ugandan Acholi women disrobing to resist land evictions (see Box 3, section 2.2).

Such practices are particularly effective in mobilising support because they **appeal to emotions and to the collective memory and history of a specific people**. They can be amplified with the support of relatively privileged, urban women and feminist activists, who can use digital technologies to connect with the struggles of the broader population, including disadvantaged rural women as well as men (Evans 2009).

Traditional and cultural practices have also been adapted by **feminist activists wishing to practice a culturally embedded form of feminism and push back on arguments dismissing feminism as "un-African" and elitist**. For instance, feminists in the Ghanaian Pepper Dem Ministries (PDM) movement have used traditional concepts and culturally situated humour[20] to communicate messages against patriarchal norms and gender-based injustices (Plange 2021). These have also been circulated on social media, for instance via digital fliers. Similar tactics may be used to promote women's political participation and advance women's or feminist perspectives on political and governance issues. However, using cultural references and traditional practices does not automatically make political movements more inclusive, if these do not purposefully reach out to marginalised communities who speak different languages and lack access to social media. Hence, there is a need to keep the **digital divide** in mind here too.

Link online activism with street and offline engagement

Women-led political movements can get better results by combining different forms of political activism, such as hashtag activism, street protests and lobbying the state for policy reforms. They can engage and reach more people and therefore increase impact by combining approaches, from "traditional" media, such as local radio and feature phones[21], to high-level, political lobbying and advocacy efforts and social media-based and street protests.

To gain extra clout, **these approaches can be linked to targeted policy reforms backed by legal conventions** to which countries have committed (e.g., the ACDEG, the Maputo Protocol and CEDAW). Establishing such links can help women advocates achieve long-term sustainable changes, while tapping into different networks working on the same agenda at the national level and in other countries. This strengthens the pressure women-led movements can apply on governments and duty bearers. At the same time, use of online tools for fundraising can help sustain street activism over time.

Women-led movements and feminist organisations can also combine short-term demands around specific issues (e.g., representation quotas, land rights and digital rights) with the pursuit of **long-term normative changes through education, awareness raising and political action**. For those who support women's digital or political engagement, this means pushing for gender norms that recognise women as fully fledged technology users and innovators, and as political leaders and decision makers on a range of societal issues and not only on "women's issues".

Engage with and pressure the state for accountability

Women-led movements are understandably wary about engaging with states that are (seen to be) involved in human rights and digital rights violations, or are inaccessible and unwilling to listen to women political activists. But while digital technologies, particularly social media, provide alternative spaces for women to engage in politics and activism, this report has shown that online spaces can also be oppressive towards women, invisibilising and endangering them. Our study also stresses that digital activism only goes so far in effecting change. It must be complemented by policy reforms to set in motion longer term change processes. This points to the need for women-

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[20] For instance, "Pepper Dem!" is a West African slang expression calling on the other to "say it like it is" even when the truth is uncomfortable.

[21] I.e. Phones without internet capability, as opposed to "smartphones".

led movements to **engage with state actors and policy processes at the national, regional and continental levels to maintain pressure on states to be accountable** to the legal and policy decisions they have committed to. In Africa, this can include engagement with regional economic communities (RECs) and with the African Union (AU) at the continental level.

Calls for transparency and accountability can also be targeted at tech companies. Demands can focus on changes in how their algorithms function and setting up safeguards to ensure that algorithms do not reinforce historical gender and racial inequalities. For example, states can establish legislation **requiring tech companies to establish risk assessment mechanisms** that include feedback from the various communities that may be impacted by new digital products or tools (Di Meco and Brechenmacher 2020). To make the internet safer for women (activists) states should criminalise gendered online harassment and violence and apply sanctions on perpetrators. As cyber crimes are a new area of law enforcement, especially gendered cyber crimes and harassment, states should invest in equipping law enforcement bodies with tools and mechanisms to identify, follow up and take action on online harassment and gender-based violence (Di Meco and Brechenmacher 2020).

Research to support women-led political movements in Africa

Think tanks and academia should pay greater attention to gender and intersectionality when looking at how digital technologies impact democratic governance and political activism in Africa. The aim is to avoid perpetuating and reinforcing knowledge gaps and stereotypes that fuel gender, racial and geographic inequalities. As yet, there is scant sex-disaggregated data on digitalisation and technology, and little literature on the gendered aspects of digitalisation in Africa (EU 2020). Beyond data, researchers need to be mindful of the framings and narratives they use (e.g., women as only victims of exclusion). These have been unduly relied on when talking about African women and their political roles, both online and offline. Ideally, researchers working on the digital divide would co-create studies with, or feed information back to, the women and communities affected by the digital divide, so they gain more tools to understand and address their situation. This implies producing research in different languages, giving full credit to the people and communities behind knowledge production, using accessible vocabulary and disseminating research findings directly to communities that might use them.

Researchers and analysts should avoid overly optimistic or pessimistic analyses of the potential of digital technologies for advancing women's rights and democratic governance. In particular, simplistic comparisons or generalisations need to be avoided, such as assumptions that the Arab Spring experience can be duplicated throughout sub-Saharan Africa, despite these regions' very different levels of internet penetration, civil society space and women's participation in formal decision-making.

Furthermore, when looking at how digitalisation will impact dynamics in Africa, **researchers cannot overlook the influence of global power inequalities, such as patriarchal and colonial legacies, on the way digital technologies are designed and implemented**, by whom and for whom. Considering this, researchers could focus on finding ways to reduce – or even eliminate – the effects of global inequalities on how digital technologies function. For instance, they could conduct AI research on automatic content moderation and automatic translation algorithms that intentionally seeks to include marginalised groups and regional languages. Of course, this needs to be backed by investments from tech companies and states.

Digital technologies open new opportunities for research as well. For instance, online platforms and social media can be used as **"listening" tools,**[22] to provide information on popular perceptions, including those of communities that otherwise have little visibility, around issues like political governance and gender equality (Lutkevich 2022). The caveat here is that online spaces do not always represent realities on the ground.[23] Nonetheless, researchers should seize the opportunities that digital technologies offer to better understand and amplify the voices and perspectives of African women.

4.3. A role for supranational organisations in supporting women's political and digital rights

Regional-level accountability and political dialogue

Regional solutions are needed to support women's political and digital rights for a few reasons. First, online information and platforms, and the private companies that develop digital technologies, are transnational in nature. This makes it difficult for states to regulate them. Compounding this is the fact that multinational private companies have powerful lobbies and can resist pressure by states, especially those states with limited financial leverage and which do not host tech company headquarters. As just one example of the challenges, it is more difficult and time-consuming for African litigators to sue US-based companies (including but not limited to the tech sector) because of the extra steps involved in proving these companies can be held accountable to non-US litigators for their deeds outside the United States. **Regional alliances of states or regional organisations may be able to apply more pressure on tech companies than individual states**.

Second, as mentioned, some states have failed to enact laws that protect women political activists online, and some have even used digital technologies for surveillance and repression purposes. If digital governance and digital rights were fully integrated in the normative and legal frameworks of African RECs and the AU, citizens and activists might be able to exert more pressure on their governments for breaches of such normative codes. However, on much of the continent, as elsewhere in the world, legal frameworks for governance of the digital space lag behind the pace of technological innovation. The responsibilities and authorities of states, private companies and citizens in the digital space therefore remain unclear. Although the AU and RECs do not have superseding authority over member states, they have occupied a forerunner role in norm-setting on governance. A next frontier for them in this respect could be identifying and promoting **principles and guidelines on the digital rights and responsibilities** of citizens, states, private actors and others.

There have been positive developments. In February 2020, the AU adopted the Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) 2020-2030. It recognises the importance of addressing the digital gender divide, for instance, via educational frameworks, policies and digital skills development for women and girls. Further, the AU Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, adopted in 2002 and updated in 2019 to include digital rights, seeks to protect internet users' rights to data privacy, freedom of expression and access to information online without government interference and surveillance – with an emphasis on marginalised communities (Bussiek 2022).

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[22] Social media listening can be defined as the "process of identifying and assessing what is being said about a company, individual, product or brand on the internet". It is often used by marketing companies to better assess how receptive online audiences are to a product or service. In recent years, it has started being used by researchers to gain insights on online users' perceptions and behaviours by tapping into the massive data available on social media (Lutkevich 2022).

[23] This has to do with the fact that in some contexts, a majority of the population may not use social media, or the social media platform preferences of users might be demographically stratified, e.g., with a particular demographic group may be using Twitter more than Facebook.

There are options to **bring cases involving digital rights before the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR) and regional courts**, like the East African and ECOWAS courts of justice.[24] However, accessing these courts and enforcing their decisions remains a challenge.[25] In June 2020, the ECOWAS Court of Justice "clearly recognised access to the internet as a human right with legal obligations especially on governments of member states". This ruling involved the Togolese government's September 2017 internet shutdown, which the court found to be unlawful and in violation of the right to freedom of expression, in a case filed by Amnesty International Togo with the support of the NGO Access Now. In the future, such courts could receive cases involving women's digital rights drawing from the examples of other litigation conducted at the national or supranational level.[26]

Building on these positive developments, extra attention is needed to enable digital technologies' use to support women seeking to engage in politics and defend their rights. For example, **the AU is well placed to set standards and provide guidance to member states on ways to better promote women's political participation via digital technologies and address online intimidation, harassment and gender-based violence**. In doing so, the AU can draw inspiration from the experiences of Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia in mainstreaming gender in digital policies (EU 2020).

Meaningful Africa-Europe cooperation to support women-led political movements and digitalisation

Both the AU and the EU have paid increasing attention to digitalisation. **The EU is vocal about its aim to integrate digitalisation into its external action in Africa**, for instance, through its Digital4Development (D4D) initiative, its multiannual indicative programmes (many of which mainstream digitalisation), and its Global Gateway Initiative, which anticipates €150 billion in investment in African infrastructure, including digital infrastructure (Domingo 2022). The EU has also committed to promoting the inclusion of women and marginalised groups in digitalisation efforts. The EU's Third Gender Action Plan 2021-2025 includes women's inclusion in the digital transformation as a key focus area (EC 2020). A 2017 EU staff working document on D4D emphasises the need to address the digital gender divide and improve women's empowerment through digitalisation. While these efforts are laudable, more needs to be done to translate them into action in a contextualised manner. So far, the digitalisation projects that have been implemented in sub-Saharan Africa under the D4D have under-prioritised digital skills and literacy training, though these are considered crucial to combat women's disadvantageous position in regard to digital technologies (EU 2020).[27]

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[24] For more information on how to litigate digital rights in Africa, see [Module 6: Litigating Digital Rights Cases in Africa](#)

[25] For instance, NGOs based in states that do not acknowledge the AfCHPR's jurisdiction (often the same states that resort to internet shutdowns and other digital rights violations) may not submit cases before the court. The court also requires that all local remedies be exhausted before it hears a case, making the process prohibitively expensive and time consuming for many civil society actors (Tegegn 2021).

[26] For instance, in 2018, several CSOs in Uganda sued the government over the so-called "social media tax", which makes accessing social media more difficult for economically disadvantaged segments of the population, including women (Tegegn 2021).

[27] Study for the assessment of DEVCO work in digitalisation in sub-Saharan Africa: Final report, European Commission, June 2020. Cited in EU report "Digital4Women".

Africa and Europe could benefit from each other's experiences in addressing some of the challenges mentioned in this paper, but such **a partnership can only work if there are no double standards when it comes to online safety, digital equity and knowledge exchange**. Indeed, as read in this report, African civil society actors have developed several tools, platforms and strategies to equip politically active women with digital skills and information about online safety, and public institutions like African courts have in some cases started holding states accountable for breaches of citizens' digital rights (such as the ECOWAS court ruling on Togo's 2017 internet shutdown). These experiences can be of great value to European actors seeking to address the rising wave of far right, often sexist and racist online communities that threaten the safety of women political activists and politicians and undermine democracy in Europe.

The EU, for its part, has developed promising legislation to address online disinformation, gender-based violence and privacy violations by requiring social media platforms to apply transparent and risk-sensitive moderation practices and AI algorithms (Digital Services Act). The European Commission's White Paper on AI, which is meant to be preliminary to corresponding legislation, also seeks to address gender and racial bias in AI algorithms. The AU could draw inspiration from these policy efforts when developing its own digital strategies.

The AU could take advantage of the evolving partnership on digitalisation to raise critical issues at the diplomatic level. For example, **most tech companies appear to invest more effort in addressing online abuse in Europe and the United States than in other regions, including Africa. Similarly, tech companies tend to employ content moderators who are familiar mostly with Western languages and cultures. They are therefore ill-equipped to identify and report abuses in other languages and outside Western understandings of gender-based violence** (Web Foundation 2020; Di Meco and Brechenmacher 2020).[28] The EU could support African governments in redressing this enforcement gap. For example, it could provide assistance in developing or strengthening regulations against online disinformation and gender-based violence, taking into account the need for a cultural understanding of how these can manifest across the African continent. The EU could also provide financial support to African institutions charged with monitoring and regulating the digital sector.

The African diaspora and other minorities in Europe may have different understandings of what constitutes harmful gendered stereotypes and gender-based violence. Recognising this, through its Digital Services Act, the EU could require tech companies operating in Europe to hire a number of content moderators from diaspora and minority communities, or at least be made accountable for providing training and sensitisation to content moderators so they better understand cultural differences (Web Foundation 2020).[29] African member states could support the EU in better understanding the digital experiences of its African diaspora.

Finally, there are several broader ways in which the AU and EU can work together to **strengthen women-led and feminist organisations active in political governance and gender equality in Africa:** by supporting them in developing critical skills, like diversification of funding sources; by providing more long-term and flexible funding with simplified reporting and administrative requirements; and by supporting a diverse set of women-led organisations, with members of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds and including small organisations and regional alliances, as well as both recent and long-established organisations (Gaspais 2021).

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[28] For instance, in certain countries, "a picture of an unmarried woman standing next to a man could lead to dangerous consequences, even honour killings", whereas content moderators would seldom identify it as a violation of the online platform's policy. See Web Foundation 2020.
Beyond this, improving online moderators' working conditions (they often have a heavy workload and are exposed to abusive, potentially traumatic content online) would be a first step to improve the quality of human (versus automatic) content moderation of online platforms.

[29] For instance, in certain countries, "a picture of an unmarried woman standing next to a man could lead to dangerous consequences, even honour killings" whereas content moderators would seldom identify it as a violation of the online platform's policy.

5. Conclusion

Digital technologies can strengthen women-led political movements and feminist activism in Africa. *First*, these technologies enable networking among online communities so that women and gender minorities can find new tools for self-empowerment and political engagement. Through online transnational networks, they can share their experiences and tactics of activism. *Second*, digital technologies provide a space where marginalised political and governance issues can gain a spotlight and become more normalised. Using digital tools, women and feminist activists have in some cases succeeded in redefining gender equality, women's perspectives and political leadership as "policy worthy" issues. *Third*, women are increasingly using digital technologies to gain visibility and financing and demand state accountability, amplifying their position as leaders in the fight for gender equality and broader political movements. New online spaces provide opportunities for African women political activists and feminists to access individuals, organisations and platforms through which they can influence decision-making. Though this is promising, it has often come with women being side-lined from formal political decision-making once the movements they led or promoted become formalised.

However, digitalisation has significant shortcomings and brings particular risks. African women, overall, access and use digital technologies and the internet less than men. This digital gender divide is especially evident in rural areas, among those with lower socio-economic backgrounds, lower educational levels and speaking only regional or local languages. Their perspectives and causes are therefore underrepresented in online political activism, while alliances linking women from different backgrounds have been limited. Women who are politically active online – regardless of their background – are also likely to experience backlash in the form of derision, disinformation, harmful stereotypes and gender-based violence for their activism, especially if this is perceived as breaking gendered social codes.

Aside from societal and infrastructural barriers, digital technologies themselves have drawbacks. The way digital technologies and online platforms function tends to reproduce historical biases against women, non-Western individuals and minorities, making African women-led political movements less visible online. Actors in the "international development" system, like the EU, have demonstrated growing concern for gender equality and digitalisation in Africa. But they have also been criticised as depoliticising the fight for gender equality in Africa and side-lining grassroots African CSOs, making it harder for African feminists and political activists to tackle the root causes of gendered, political and socio-economic exclusion in their countries.

Therefore, while digital technologies can amplify messages in favour of women's political engagement, they also offer a platform for powerful counterforces, online and in society, which women's movements by themselves cannot circumvent. This means the use of digital technologies needs to be accompanied by structural change in the form of policy reforms and education. There are a number of actions that can be carried out to address these structural barriers (Box 9 presents a summary of recommendations). *First*, the digital divide needs to be tackled by making digital rights, skills and infrastructure-building a national priority and key aspect of development cooperation. It is also important to promote gender norms that recognise women as fully fledged tech users and innovators, and as political leaders on a range of societal topics not limited to "women's issues". Women-led political movements themselves can benefit from engaging and building coalitions involving women from diverse backgrounds and political perspectives. *Second*, activists need to combine different forms of political activism, like online activism, street protests and lobbying the state for policy reforms. Embedding political activism in cultural contexts and traditional practices, and evoking legal conventions their countries have ratified, can help women activists garner wider societal, political and also international support. *Third*, African states and regional institutions should invest in developing their legal frameworks and law enforcement capacities around digital governance. These legal mechanisms should protect users of digital technologies and hold tech companies, individuals and states

accountable for making the digital space safe and accessible for all citizens, including women. They should also ensure digital technologies are a positive tool for citizen participation and inclusive socio-economic development. *Lastly*, it is important to realise that research on digitalisation and political activism is not neutral. Researchers have a responsibility to take into account international and (intra)national injustices when analysing the fast-changing digital landscape and how it affects politics and governance in Africa. Only by intentionally doing so can they avoid perpetuating dynamics that work against women-led activism – digital or otherwise – in Africa, and find solutions.

Box 9. Summary of recommendations

For women-led political movements and organisations, including feminist organisations

Engage and build coalitions across diverse identity groups and political stances (e.g., national and regional, rural, feminist, LGBTQI+). In transnational movements, ensure equal representation of women from Africa.

Combine different forms of political activism, like hashtag activism, traditional practices, street protests and lobbying the state for policy reforms.

Combat the digital divide (e.g., with digital skills training and lobbying the state for cheaper access) and include marginalised women via mechanisms for exchange and use of local languages, radio and feature phones.

Partner up to bring cases before African courts of justice to advance digital rights in relation to political freedoms and gender equality.

For policymakers at national and supranational levels

Address the digital divide by expanding digital infrastructure and skills, lowering costs, and increasing women's access to education, literacy and savings, promote social norms that recognise women as tech users, innovators and political leaders.

Pressure tech companies for better moderation of online content that perpetuates gendered disinformation and violence, and enact transparency and accountability mechanisms to counter the harmful impacts of algorithms.

At the regional level, develop standards for states on the digital divide, regulating tech and enacting laws against online gender-based violence backed by resources and training.

Use the AU-EU partnership on digitalisation to exchange good practices, such as the protection of digital rights by African courts and NGOs and EU regulations on tech companies.

For regional and international actors, support diverse women-led organisations, help them diversify their funding, make funding long term and flexible, and simplify reporting.

For academic researchers and think tanks

Pay systematic attention to gender and intersectionality when looking at how digital technologies impact democratic governance and political activism. Co-create research with, and feed your information back to, those who can make direct use of it.

Tap into digital technologies as "listening tools" providing information on popular perceptions, especially of communities that have little visibility.

Avoid overly optimistic or pessimistic analyses on the potential of digital technologies to advance women's rights and democratic governance.

Take into account how global power inequalities (patriarchal, colonial legacies) impact women-led movements in Africa and how digital technologies are designed and implemented.

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