

GENDER INEQUALITY AND ACCESS TO THE INTERNET: A STUDY OF LAFIA METROPOLIS, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Electronic communications networks that connects people the world over is fast becoming cheaper, purposeful and beneficial to users. However, in this age of modern technologies, the idea of mainstreaming the female gender, especially in male-dominated cultures into this social activity and civilization is still a far cry. A high percentage of the population constituting of women have limited or no access to the internet. The study identified major obstacles limiting women's access to the internet and how to increase network access. Therefore, this study explores gender inequality and their privation to social media usage. Its major argument is that the internet which is supposed be an empowering mechanism for women as development partners in society are deprived of the gains and participation in that space. The study assumes that; the internet has the potential to promote gender equality, increase productivity, reduce poverty and contribute to sustainable development. Besides, it would lead to job creation and consequently increase people's income with a multiplier effect of ergonomic. It is believed that

nations that develop the capacity to manage valuable information within the cyber space and make such accessible to their citizens are likely to experience enhanced productivity and greater wealth. Considering the importance of the new media platforms; internet connectivity and usage can be greatly improved through the inclusion of women bearing in mind their population in society. The study applied the liberal feminist theory, and it employed quantitative and qualitative method of data collection. Questionnaire was administered to one hundred and twenty five women who were randomly selected, and for the qualitative data, in-depth interview was utilized. The study concludes that; the nature and level of women's participation in the internet in Lafia Metropolis is abysmal. The study recommends that more women need to be enlighten on the importance of the usefulness of the internet in the modern world as well as calling for safer cyber space.

Key Words: Gender, Empowerment, Gender in Inequality, Internet, Access

Introduction

The internet is a distinct social digital reality, an integral part of globalization and a gate way to the electronic world. A lot of changes have occurred in international trade, dramatically changing the demographics of the global economy. Current globalization reflects a fundamental shift in the world economy. The so called global village is emerging, facilitated by advances in transport technology, telecommunications technology culminating into the internet, and the wide world web. The internet is a high source of information where businesses and opportunities thrive and it

reaches a global audience faster and less expensive. Shaw & Lee (2001), posit that the internet is a fast publishing medium which has been used as a means of sexual exploitation. They further added that, this exploitation has been carried out on women mostly, thus resulting to global economic inequalities. On the bright side, globalization and the new technology especially information technology has a lot of potential for Africa and Nigeria in particular. Yet the country's contribution to global trade which is solely dependent on oil exports alone is not going to be beneficial to her growth and development as a country that wants to remain relevant in world trade. Also, pertinent to mention, here is the problem of low productivity which is fast becoming like a plague and threat to her survival amongst comity of nations the world over. Thus there is need to boost this productivity, this can be done through the focus on human resource development, investing in people especially computer and

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information technology; especially as it affect women as partners in nation building. In line with the dearth of participation on the internet, Alliance Partners promised to bring 600, 000 young women online in Kenya and Nigeria by the year 2018. In doing so, it is to broaden the horizon of opportunities for social and economic empowerment. The point of departure of this study is that; the internet has the potential to promote gender equality, reduce poverty and contribute to sustainable socio/economic and political development of the Nigerian nation. It is quite apparent that information is the life line of the new world order; which makes it a valuable resource venture. It has been argued that the nations that develop the capacity to manage valuable information and make it accessible to their citizens are likely to experience enhanced productivity and increased wealth.

Undoubtedly, it is clear that in the 21st century a large part of that information movement is done through the internet. Indeed, with the internet, the entire world of information is being harnessed in order to diminish Physical, geographical, socio-economic, political and cultural distances. Hanmakyugh, (2013:185) believes that the: “sophistication of new technologies like the internet and mobile cell phone device, it is possible for remote or isolated places to get connected and take the advantage of being a part of the globalized information society”. Lamentably, a high percentage of the population in Nigeria constituting of women still has limited or no access to the internet. According to Sow (2014) men are twice more likely to have access to the internet than women. Furthermore, the **Internationals** Report on Women and the Web, records that; it is evident that on an average across the developing world, nearly 25 percent fewer women than men have access to the internet. The access gap widens to nearly 45 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. The interesting phenomenon is that there tend to be a lot of barriers to women's access to the internet, at the same time, that access would reduce those barriers.

Interestingly, the acquisition of technological skills especially information and communications technologies has the potentials and capacity to increase women's access to paid employment. As a result of the numerous benefits of internet access, it

would be pertinent for an unbounded outreach in order that we reduce the gender gap of participation. According to Smiley (2017) women are 1.6 times more likely than men to lack internet proficiency. This calls for action to end this exclusion of women from the internet and exploit its potential to reduce gender inequality in a wide range of sectors. The internet is a very rich domain, hence, there is a lot of knowledge and skills out there that women can access and put to profitable use. Improved access does not only improve women's lives, but inclusion would go a long way in reducing the north south digital divide to a reasonable extent.

It is significant to note that; gender inequality does not only manifest in limiting, or lack of women's access to the internet, it is also visible in women's underrepresentation in the technology industries. Suriano (2017) points out that technological companies like Facebook, Google, and Apple have 17%, 19%, and 23% women as their technology staff. This is obviously a form of systematic discrimination and gross representation of the women in these spheres of technological workplace. It has been argued that when women are locked out of the digital products, business loses customers. World Economic Forum's Founder, Dr. Klaus Schwab posits that only those economies that have full access to all their talent will remain competitive and will prosper. He lend his voice and weight to ours as he further states that, it is more important because gender equality is a matter of justice and that as humans, we also have the obligation to ensure a more balanced set of values. The McKinsey Global Institute found out that when one removes the obstacles that constrain women from reaching parity with men, US\$ 28 trillion of new value is added to Global GDP within 10 years.

In Nigeria the government through the federal ministry of communication, through its social intervention of the “Growing Girls and Women in Nigeria” (G-WIN) initiated projects such as smart woman Nigeria, Digital Girls ICT and Hauwei 1000 Girls. These initiatives were meant to bridge the gender gap in digital access and empowerment by providing women essential health, education and agricultural information online. Although the internet is a potential enabler, more than half of the

world population may still be offline as observed by Charauorti(2017), that there is a gender gap in internet usage, this to a large extent may be the reality on ground. This also may be the reality in sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria in particular as gender disparity, discrimination and inequality still subsist. However, one major problem facing African societies is poverty and the situation seems worse in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria inclusive. Nigeria is a country endowed with great human and material resources, yet the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) seems to have grown without the corresponding creation of jobs for her citizenry. It is estimated that 86.9 per cent of Nigerians live below poverty line and currently rank as the world's center for the poorest poor (SDG's 2018 and kazeem, 2018). The Federal Ministry of Labour in Nigeria (2009) observed the exceptionally high unemployment rates recorded in Nigeria since 1999 that has occurred in time of rapid economic growth with GDP rising on average of seven percent annually. This relatively high economic growth did not translate into relatively low unemployment. Nigeria unemployment levels are said to have reached crisis situation as observed by Kpakol, (2016). This calls for continuous investment in people to reduce high levels of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria. Against this backdrop therefore, the study seeks to address the inequality and access to internet in Lafia metropolis, Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Gender, Gender inequality and Women Exclusion

The study on Gender Inequality and access to the internet hinges on the concepts of gender, gender inequality and liberal feminism.

Gender

While sex focuses on the biological and physiological characteristics that define male and female, gender is a sociological variable. Gender is a social construct and refers to the socio-cultural distinctions, capacities and attributes that define femininity and masculinity (Oakley 1972, Scott 1986 and Pietila, 2002). Macionis (2001) defines gender as the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being male or female. Gender is hierarchical in nature, it

interfaces with other variables in a complexity of ways to create power, wealth and resource access differentials in men and women in favour of men. Gender is a category that largely establishes life chances, shaping one's participation in society and the economy (World Bank, 2001). Fortunately unlike biological variables that are more or less fixed, gender variables are dynamic and change over time; thus lending themselves amenable or responsive to policy initiatives and social change.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is the hint that there is a disparity between men and women; and that this affects an individual's living capability. Sociologists define gender inequality as the differences in status and prestige women and men have in groups, collectivities and societies (Giddens 2002). Historically women have been perceived as different and unequal. In this vein gender plays a central role in structuring the types of opportunities, life chances and role occurring to individuals and groups. Gender inequalities manifest in different ways. In this study, gender inequality manifests in limited or lack of access and use of internet services for women.

Gender inequalities have negative consequences for individual, groups and societies in general. Gender inequalities harms as well ashinder societal growth and development. It incapacitates people's ability for improved and sustainable livelihoods. Gender inequalities among other things reduce productivity, reduce opportunities for the elimination of poverty and create conditions that militate against socio-economic growth and development. It weakens the prospect of good governance and the effectiveness of government policies (World Bank 2001, Igube, 2010). Furthermore, gender differences are more pronounced among the poor and the less disadvantaged, most of whom are women.

Theoretical Framework

The study on Gender Inequality and Access to the Internet employs the feminist theory. Specifically, that which is hinged on Liberal Feminism. Liberal feminist theory is a theory of gender inequality, which argues that women may claim equality with men on the basis of an essential human capacity for

reasoned moral agency (Idyorough 2005). It is further argued that gender inequality emanated from patriarchy and the sexist patterning of the division of Labour (Ritzer & Stepnisky 2014). The theory is largely premised on the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill. The theory assumes that men and women are situated in society unequally. For instance, women get less of the material resources, social status, power and opportunities for self-actualization than do men who share their social location (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). The proponents of the liberal feminist strand, Betty Friedan, Alison Jaggar and Luce Irigaray, all seek to do away with any practice or laws that most times discriminate against particular groups. It also seeks to remove barriers that prevent women's equal access to opportunities in society.

Liberal feminists therefore, work towards gender equality in the society in which they find themselves. The theory lays emphasis on social, economic, political and legal reforms, ensuring that policies within society are designed to foster equal opportunities for women (Ogunbameru (2013) and Andersen, 2003). As a matter of fact, it dwells on the women's abilities, choices and actions towards securing and maintaining equality in their society.

The Liberal feminist theory is criticized on the grounds that, all women would like to be like men. On the tenet of this theory for change in society, which is restricted to issues of equal opportunity should be adequately addressed. In spite of these criticisms, Liberal feminist theory remains relevant to issues of inequality in societies. For this study, the theory is most suitable because in Nigeria, issues of gender inequality still abound especially when it bothers on access to certain opportunities. Thus, creating policies that give opportunities and protect users of the internet might increase women's access to the internet. And this will not only boost their economic activities, but empower them and possibly reduce the gender gap. Natasha Walter (1998), support the claim above, that through reforms, women will gain more power and will be in position to improve and access more opportunities for themselves and for other women.

Methodology

The study area was Lafia metropolis, in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Data was collected using quantitative and qualitative methods. The primary data was obtained through the use of questionnaire. Respondents were women aged 20 – 55 years, drawn from the area of study which is Lafia metropolis. Questionnaire was administered to a total of 125 women using systematic random sampling technique. The questionnaire elicited responses which covered the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, and also, on ownership of a computer or smart phones, internet connectivity, access and use.

While the qualitative data was derived through in-depth interview, triangulation of the techniques was utilized for a robust data generation for this study.

Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics

Data Analysis

Results and discussion of findings

Ownership of computer/ Smartphone

The study established that ownership of a computer and a smartphone play key roles in the use and access to the internet. The result in table one below revealed that sixty four (64) percent of women own computer and eighty eight (88.8) percent own smart phones. This obviously presents a good picture that most women who have computers or own a smart phone may likely be connected to the internet. This is rightly stated by Schaefer (2008) that, virtually everyone can reach the internet with a phone line, a computer and a modem.

As reflected on the tables below, result from the quantitative data are positive, as more women own a personal computer or a smartphone. The qualitative data presents a divergent view as to why more women own smartphones. One of the participants in the study maintained that:

The reason why more women have smartphone is not because they want to access the internet, but to be called owners of smartphones- it is a status symbol. (Personal interview)

From the statement above, this to an extent could mean that more women own a personal computer or a smartphone, but are still not connected to the internet.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by ownership computer/Smartphone.

Own a computer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, I have	80	64.0%
No, I don't	45	36.00
Total	125	100.0

Source: Field work 2019

Own a smartphone	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, I have	118	94.4
No, I don't	7	5.6
Total	125	100.0

Table 2: Internet connectivity/Nature of women's

Nature of use	Frequency	Percentage
Browse, chat, information and business	54	43.2
Browsing, messaging and calls	19	15.2
Nil	23	18.4
Reading news	6	4.8
Research and chats	23	18.4
Total	125	100.0

Table 3: Internet use

Use of Internet	Frequency	Percentage
Nil	16	12.8
Not often	19	15.2
Often	34	27.2
Very often	56	44.8
Total	125	100.0

Source: Field work 2019

The tables above (tables 2 and 3) present data on internet connectivity and nature of use.

A total of fifty four respondents, that is 43.2 percent, admitted using the internet for browsing, information, business and chatting. Women actually use the internet for various purposes, ranging from browsing, chatting, research and so on. The study established that the nature of use is low, even though majority of the respondents 44.8 percent claim to use the internet very often as shown on table 3.

Even when women use the internet, they do it indirectly. To support this claim quoting a key respondent:

In Lafia, statistically only one woman to ten men use the internet. It must be a necessity before you find women making use of the internet. And even at that, they use the internet indirectly. Most of the times, they assign people to do the job for them. (Personal interview)

Findings also show that women who access the internet in Lafia, use it for fun instead of using it for things that will empower them.

Level of internet access

The result shows that, above fifty percent of women in Lafia access the internet very often. And they use it for various purposes accessing different applications on social media. See table 4 below

Table 4: Time of last internet usage

Level of usage	Frequency	Percentage
Days ago	27	21.6
Minutes ago	63	50.4
Months ago	11	8.8
Nil	19	15.2
Weeks ago	5	4.0
Total	125	100.0

Barriers to women's access and use of the internet

Table 5: Time of last internet usage

Level of usage	Frequency	Percentage
Google and other search engines	35	28.0
Google, facebook, WhatsApp	8	6.4
Nil	38	30.4
Social networks and email	33	26.4
WhatsApp	11	8.8
Total	125	100.0

Table 6: Problem faced with internet/social media use

Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Adverts	3	2.4
Bad network	84	67.2
Battery consumption	1	.8
Excess data	6	4.8
False information	4	3.2
Nil	27	21.6
Total	125	100.0

Source: Field work 2019

The internet as the world's largest computer network provides a wider ground for social media space. This has helped to make communication and business easy within society. Unfortunately, not everyone can get into the information lane, especially not women.

In spite of the fact that the internet has empowered a lot of people, it also has many disadvantages for most users. This is because most users suffer from bullying, harassment, and limited broad band or internet services as seen. Table 6 above, shows that internet users, eighty four respondents making up 67.2 percent within Lafia metropolis, said that internet connectivity is very poor, and is attributable to bad network. While others term most of the information found on the internet as fake.

Also, illiteracy serves as a major barrier. From the results, more women are offline due to their level of education. Fewer women actually know how to use the internet because they find it difficult to understand. This buttress Sow (2014) position that, poverty, illiteracy and discrimination are what prevents women from being present in the digital zone. ONE, (2016) also corroborated the point that

the overriding barrier is education as observed by our study.

Fear is also one of the barriers; most women lack the ability and proficiency of the internet. So far, fear of bullying, scamming and harassment, prevents a lot of women from accessing the social media space. From the qualitative data on the question of why most women are not utilizing the internet, one of the respondents bluntly put it thus:

My spouse has refused me access to Internet, he believes the internet is A bad place, where you find nude pictures on display and women are often taken advantage of.

(Personal interview)

Table 7: How to ensure that more women use internet

Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Create women related Apps	2	1.6
Educate women on the importance	41	48.0
Make data access cheaper free and improve space	20	16.0
Make smartphone affordable	32	24.8
Nil	31	24.8
Total	125	100.0

Ways of enhancing access to the internet

In ensuring that more women use the internet, most of the respondents above 48 percent suggested that more women should be educated on the importance of the internet and the many opportunities inherent in it. On the other hand, 16 percent advocated for cheaper data rates.

What can be done to improve women's access to the internet? Safe cyber space is necessary, social media providers should ensure that people are enlighten on what information to put out to the public as most times information in the public space is really damaging. More women should be encouraged to take computer lessons as a means of enhancing social communication techniques and empowerment.

Conclusion

The internet plays an important role in modern day societies, hence, it strive to improve the quality of

human existence in terms of acquiring knowledge, economic prosperity and greater productivity. It serves as an opportunity ground for people to access previously inaccessible things, yet not all can access that opportunity. In this paper we have demonstrated that access to the internet can bring advancement in communication, self-improvement and education, especially if women are empowered with it. Our data illustrates that more women have computer and smart phones, which will at least give them access to the internet, but are not using it. This is not unconnected to bad network service and exorbitant rate of data cost in Nigeria.

The internet which provides us with useful information for daily use and to promote our businesses, should be made available to all and sundry in Nigerian, especially to women. Our investigation on women's connectivity to the internet and the nature of their usage, reveals that they are still disadvantaged even in the face of global workforce. And in the face of the new normal, a lot has changed, as to how businesses are run all over the world. More businesses would definitely be managed through the internet. Disappointingly, we observed that, even when few women connect to various social media space, the focus most times is on irrelevances and gossips. In other words, majority do not use it as a tool for empowerment but for fun. Poor network and illiteracy, peculiar traits of developing nations, are part of the problems why there is a huge gap in internet access between men and women. Also, socio-cultural norms are responsible for why most women are not connected or making use of the internet in Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Thus if a majority of a nation's population consisting of women are still not familiar with the internet or are offline, it will only mean that they cannot contribute to the country's economic growth.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings made, the exploratory insights drawn through the discussion of findings and the conclusion drawn, the research makes the following recommendations:

- Empowering women through capacity building and improving access to the internet has the potential to create jobs and increase women's income.

- Closing the internet access gap would open more opportunities for every one –men as well as women.
- Engaging in the historic milestone of the internet as part of their (women) attraction would build a common platform, and at the same time, spread global membership with other organizations the world over, as they advance the women rights struggles around the world.
- It is imperative for women to avail themselves with the internet; hence it is the best source of variety of information required as a means of empowerment. Indeed, internet and technology are best ways of empowering women as some information and updates could be on community grants programmes which can only be sourced through internet facilities.
- For our world of today, most businesses will be carried out on line as more and more people would have to work from home. Women must have to brace up to the new mode of business trends in order to be relevant and function in society.
- The Nigerian government should also make connection to the internet easier for the common woman on the street as seen in other climes.

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