

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Unequal in an unequal world: gender dimensions of communication rights

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Lee, Philip
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-07-03 12:38:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/235140

MORE OR LESS EQUAL

*How Digital Platforms Can Help Advance
Communication Rights*

Editors Philip Lee / Dafne Sabanes Plou



More or Less Equal

*How Digital Platforms Can Help
Advance Communication Rights*

Philip Lee / Dafne Sabanes Plou (Editors)

Globethics.net Global

Series editor: Christoph Stückelberger. Founder and Executive Director of Globethics.net and Professor of Ethics, University of Basel

Globethics.net Global 9

Philip Lee and Dafne Sabanes Plou (eds),

More or Less Equal: How Digital Platforms Can Help Advance Communication Rights, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2014

ISBN 978-2-88931-008-1 (online version)

ISBN 978-2-88931-009-8 (print version)

© 2014 Globethics.net

Managing Editor: Ignace Haaz

Globethics.net International Secretariat

150 route de Ferney

1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Website: www.globethics.net

Email: infoweb@globethics.net

All web links in this text have been verified as of October 2014.

This book can be downloaded for free from the Globethics.net Library, the leading global online library on ethics: www.globethics.net/publications.

© *The Copyright is the Creative Commons Copyright 2.5*. This means: Globethics.net grants the right to download and print the electronic version, to distribute and to transmit the work for free, under three conditions: 1) Attribution: The user must attribute the bibliographical data as mentioned above and must make clear the license terms of this work; 2) Non-commercial. The user may not use this work for commercial purposes or sell it; 3) No change of text. The user may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.

Globethics.net can give permission to waive these conditions, especially for reprint and sale in other continents and languages.

UNEQUAL IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD: GENDER DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION RIGHTS

Philip Lee

5.1 Background to the Debate

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and thirty-three years later, in 1981, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) entered into force. Yet it still took until 25 June 1993 for the UN World Conference on Human Rights to rededicate itself to “the global task of promoting and protecting all human rights and fundamental freedoms” and to affirm that “All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated” by adopting what became known as the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA).

The VDPA paid particular attention to women’s rights, declaring that:

The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination

on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community.

The same section (I/18) went on to say:

Gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting from cultural prejudice and international trafficking, are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and must be eliminated. This can be achieved by legal measures and through national action and international cooperation in such fields as economic and social development, education, safe maternity and health care, and social support.

Two years later, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (1995) focused on “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power” and produced global commitments to advancing a wide range of women’s rights. The momentum that gathered pace in Beijing led to the inclusion of gender equality and women’s empowerment as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (2000), addressing what many perceived as promises that had not been kept. The Beijing Conference was also notable for its focus on women and the media. In particular, Section J of the Platform for Action (234) said:

Women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry. Self-regulatory mechanisms for the media need to be created and strengthened and approaches developed to eliminate gender-biased programming. Most women, especially in developing countries, are not able to

access effectively the expanding electronic information highways and therefore cannot establish networks that will provide them with alternative sources of information. Women therefore need to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of the new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact.

Then came the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), seen as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between a widely recognized human rights culture and a rapidly developing information society as well as to tackle what was identified as the “digital divide”. There was a particular concern that the WSIS process needed to pay special attention to how the emerging information and communication society could advance gender equality, protect traditional knowledge and cultures, and improve the situation of vulnerable and marginalized people.

WSIS was invaluable in providing an opportunity for civil society organizations to have a voice where previously they had been silent and to assess deficits and new opportunities. Immediately after WSIS 2005, representatives of civil society organizations issued the Statement “Much more could have been achieved” (18 December 2005). It argued that the outcomes would have been stronger if they had been founded on an *ethical framework* that was more just, equitable and sustainable:

In an age of economic globalization and commodification of knowledge, the ethics and values of justice, equity, participation and sustainability are imperative. Beyond Tunis, all stakeholders must be encouraged to weave ethics and values language into the working on semantic web knowledge structures. Communication rights and justice are about making human communities as technology’s home and human relationships as technology’s heart.

With regard to gender equality, the Statement commented on the need to provide capacity-building aimed at women's engagement at all levels in the shaping of an Information Society, including policy-making on infrastructure development, financing, and technological choice:

There is a need for real effort and commitment to transforming the masculinist culture embedded within existing structures and discourses of the Information Society which serves to reinforce gender disparity and inequality. Without full, material and engaged commitment to the principle of gender equality, women's empowerment and non-discrimination, the vision of a just and equitable Information Society cannot be achieved.

5.2 Advances Since 2005

A fundamental principle underlies social change, communication for development and media democracy. It is that public and private debate, dialogue and conversation are essential if positive, long-term changes on key development issues are to be agreed and implemented. Such dialogue is most effective when a range of voices are empowered to be heard and acted upon. The same principle applies to the framing of policies and strategies at local, national, and international levels.

Access to information and knowledge is essential to the health of a democratic society for at least two reasons. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves a "checks and balances function" by ensuring that elected representatives can be held to account in carrying out the wishes of those who elected them. In many societies, an antagonistic relationship between media and government is a vital element of a fully functioning democracy and the role of the press is critical in disseminating information as a way of mediating between the state and all facets of civil society.

In information and communication societies, despite the proliferation of social media platforms and user-generated content, it is still essential to have a public media sector that supports democracy, is financially viable and editorially independent, and that serves the public interest. The public interest is defined as representing a plurality of voices both through multiple outlets and through a diversity of views and voices reflected within any one outlet.

ARTICLE 19 is an NGO that envisages a world where people are free to speak their opinions, to participate in decision-making and to make informed choices about their lives. In 2009 it published *The Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality*. Principle 9 covers the media:

9.1 All media should, as a moral and social responsibility, play a role in combating discrimination and in promoting intercultural understanding, including by considering the following:

- i. Taking care to report in context and in a factual and sensitive manner, while ensuring that acts of discrimination are brought to the attention of the public.*
- ii. Being alert to the danger of discrimination or negative stereotypes of individuals and groups being furthered by the media.*
- iii. Avoiding unnecessary references to race, religion, gender and other group characteristics that may promote intolerance.*
- iv. Raising awareness of the harm caused by discrimination and negative stereotyping.*
- v. Reporting on different groups or communities and giving their members an opportunity to speak and to be heard in a way that promotes a better understanding*

of them, while at the same time reflecting the perspectives of those groups or communities.

- 9.2 *Public service broadcasters should be under an obligation to avoid negative stereotypes of individuals and groups, and their mandate should require them to promote intercultural understanding and to foster a better understanding of different communities and the issues they face. This should include the airing of programmes which portray different communities as equal members of society.*
- 9.3 *Professional codes of conduct for the media and journalists should reflect equality principles and effective steps should be taken to promulgate and implement such codes.*
- 9.4 *Professional development programmes for media professionals should raise awareness about the role the media can play in promoting equality and the need to avoid negative stereotypes.*

ARTICLE 19 takes a rights-based position that is non-discriminatory and says that “people everywhere must be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information. Without these rights, democracy, good governance and development cannot happen.” A recent special report on Brazil looked at “Women on the Internet” (8 March 2013). While information and communication technologies have revolutionized the way women communicate and express their ideas, the report points out that new forms of censorship are threatening the free flow of online information. Also the infrastructure to access the Internet and the skills required to maximize the potential of user-generated content can lead to the exclusion of women:

For women, the Internet represents new opportunities and also new challenges to claim and fulfil their rights. It is also an important space for women’s empowerment. The Internet grants access to information, enables their mobilisation and visibility,

and helps them create new forms of expression and participation in public life.

This perception is highlighted in a study by the Association for Progressive Communications (ACP) called “Going Visible: Women’s Rights on the Internet” (October 2012). ACP argues that the internet has become an increasingly critical public sphere for the claiming of citizenship rights and civil liberties, including women’s rights. It is a significant space for those who have little access to other kinds of “publics” due to discrimination – based on gender, age, economic status and sexual identity – to negotiate and claim their rights. ACP’s study makes a series of recommendations:

To Governments and International Organisations

- Promote respect for human rights online and offline. Freedom of expression and opinion must be protected online, the same way they are protected offline. There is need to understand the nature of communications in the online and the offline worlds in order to correctly identify where these freedoms are exercised and what threats may be posed to these freedoms. Promote ICT use and a strategy of information, education and communication in online spaces to combat violence against women and girls and to enhance women’s and girls’ rights.
- Promote women’s and girls’ communication rights in ICT use and online spaces, encouraging their participation, content creation and freedom of expression.
- Engage in the political discussion about the promotion of internet development and internet governance with a vision of gender inclusion, gender justice and respect for human rights.
- Promote and encourage women’s participation in decision-making processes in ICT policies to secure that women’s and

girls' needs are properly considered, included and safeguarded. Protection and promotion of women's human rights cannot be left to private corporations, ISPs or individuals. States and international bodies have a moral and legal responsibility to uphold and safeguard the rights of women, both online and offline.

To The Private Sector

- Internet and telecommunications businesses such as social networking platforms, web hosting companies and mobile phone operators should develop corporate user policies and practices that respect women's rights. This includes the adequate representation of women in policy-making and standards-setting processes, and ensuring that policies and standards consider the safety and security of users.

To Civil Society Organisations

- Women's organisations are called on to take action and use ICTs for activism to combat violence against women, promote equality and build solidarity. Women should take actions to control technology and change power relations in the ICT field.
- Women's organizations must actively participate in movements for communication rights on the internet and affirm women's achievements and full participation in society, both online and offline.

5.3 Unequal in an Unequal World

Throughout history, women have been discriminated against and have generally enjoyed fewer political, legal, social and economic rights and opportunities than men. Yet, women's rights are basic rights and freedoms that all women and girls are entitled to as human beings. Human rights – as the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* affirmed – are shared by all women, men, girls and boys, and are enshrined in international agreements and law. The central concept is that every individual is entitled to rights equally, whatever their status in society.

The notion of women's rights within the framework of human rights was advanced because of traditional biases against the exercise of women's and girls' rights in favour of men and boys. In a society where women and men had unequal power, it was seen that women's rights needed to be specifically recognised and fought for. In this context, many women and men advocating for gender equality and women's rights define themselves as feminist. Feminism is, of course, a political movement and is broadly about increasing women's power relative to men's. Feminist advocacy challenges the inequalities between men and women in order to end the unequal distribution of power and resources that excludes women and other marginalized groups.

Today, unfortunately, discrimination against women continues to be widespread and can be found in every country and region of the world. Some of the challenges women face are new and not experienced by previous generations, such as HIV/AIDS, access to information and communication technologies, and new trends in macro-economic policies that worsen women's poverty. But many of them are not, such as violence against women and girls' lack of access to education. Achieving gender justice is a matter of guaranteeing basic rights and also a key means of addressing poverty and bringing about sustainable develop-

ment. Policies and practices that benefit women will also have other positive outcomes for the economy and society as a whole.

Speaking at the High-level side event on “Sustainable Development in an Unequal World” during the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (20-22 June 2012), Michelle Bachelet, former Executive Director of UN Women and newly re-elected President of Chile said:

We need to place human rights and dignity and gender equality at the centre of the sustainable development discourse, but more than discourse: actions. We need to advance equality so that women and girls can reach their potential. Women’s empowerment and gender equality are fundamental to healthy societies and economies, and sustainable development. Women are on the frontlines, especially in rural areas, and their full participation is absolutely essential to address the key issues of sustainable food, water and energy.

Later, in June 2013 and in the context of the Post-2015 Development Framework and Sustainable Development Goals, UN Women published *A Transformative Stand-alone Goal on Achieving Gender Equality, Women’s Rights and Women’s Empowerment: Imperatives and Key Components*. It stated:

A transformative stand-alone gender equality goal must be grounded in an understanding that the structural causes of gender-based inequality lie in systems of discrimination that are often justified in the name of culture, history, or group identity, and policy rationalities which assume that the best way to achieve gender equality is to reduce the role of the state and liberate ‘the market’. To address these systems of discrimination, and the institutionalization of women’s subordination that they create, the goal must seek to end violence against women and girls and provide services to victims; end histories of underinvestment in ex-

panding women's and girls' capabilities and resources; and reverse the systematic marginalization of women from public and private decision-making.

In order to address the structural causes of gender-based discrimination and to support true transformation in gender relations, UN Women proposed an integrated approach addressing three critical target areas:

- Freedom from violence against women and girls – Concrete actions to eliminate the debilitating fear and/or experience of violence must be a centrepiece of any future framework.
- Gender equality in the distribution of capabilities – knowledge, good health, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights of women and adolescent girls; and access to resources and opportunities, including land, decent work and equal pay to build women's economic and social security.
- Gender equality in decision-making power in public and private institutions, in national parliaments and local councils, the media and civil society, in the management and governance of firms, and in families and communities.

The report argued that:

Women's capacity to influence decision-making, whether in public or private institutions, is intimately linked with their capabilities. Having a voice and participating in the processes and decisions that determine their lives is an essential aspect of women's and girls' freedoms. Voice and influence in decision-making has both intrinsic value as a sign of an individual's and groups' enjoyment of democratic freedoms and rights, and can serve the instrumental function of ensuring that group-specific interests are advanced. In the case of women, this could include influencing public priorities and spending patterns to ensure adequate provision of services as well as economic and social security, and to guarantee their physical integrity and reproductive rights.

However, the report is oddly silent on one of the key mechanisms for strengthening voice and influence in decision-making at all levels and in all fields: *gender equality in access to information, communication and knowledge and to the technologies that help bring this about*. Digital platforms, user-generated content, and citizen journalism have the potential to meet this need.

The empowering use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is closely connected to socio-economic development, and this potential for social transformation demands that everyone should have equitable access. Prevailing inequalities in access to ICTs throughout the world suggest that many groups are hindered by their social and economic circumstances from making use of ICTs. In relation to women, this inequality is often referred to as “the gender digital divide”, resulting from social processes that marginalize women from technology, change and progress. The potential of ICTs is twofold: they can contribute to sustainable socio-economic development and promote gender equality. However, ICTs are not a panacea but have to be considered extremely useful and effective tools for challenging and changing existing power structures.

5.4 Conclusions

In *Ethics in the Information Society: The Nine ‘P’s*¹ (Globethics, 2013) the authors argue that justice and equity, care and compassion, participation, sharing, sustainability, and responsibility are fundamental in information and knowledge societies. With regard to gender, it states:

¹ http://www.globethics.net/documents/4289936/13403256/GE_texts_4_WSIS_web_final_cons.pdf/53fedc19-0475-4f34-bb9f-0d588b09436f

Gender equality in access to information, communication, knowledge and decision-making is an important dimension of an inclusive and people-centre society. It includes ensuring parity in women's representation in high levels and decision-making. As such it calls for "Building empowering capabilities of women and girls to use ICTs for education, formation and citizenship and for older persons in computer and internet literacy.

The three case studies that follow this short overview reflect the experiences of women's rights groups in India, South Africa and Turkey, which in their different contexts and according to their different needs are seizing upon digital communication technologies to advance the cause of gender justice and to advocate for greater public awareness of the issues at stake and for better political and social policies.

All three organizations support Globethics' own expression of "fundamental values for knowledge societies":

- Justice/equity is based on the inalienable human dignity of every human being and on their equality. Justice grows when people cultivate a deep respect towards each other. Fair and equal chances of access to information are a precondition for mutual understanding.
- Freedom of access to information, of expression, of believe and of decision is core for human dignity and human development. Freedom, equity and responsibility balance each other.
- Care and compassion is the ability for empathy, respect and support of the other. It leads to solidarity.
- Participation is the right and ability to participate in societal life and in decisions of concern.
- Sharing leads to, enables, and sustains relationships between human beings and strengthens communities. The ITCs enable

in an extraordinary way the sharing of information and knowledge.

- Sustainability as long term perspective for green technologies.

Responsibility is accountability for one's own actions. The level of responsibility has to correspond to the level of power, capacity and capability. Those with more resources bear greater responsibility.