



Girls in Cyberspace: Dangers and Opportunities

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Executive Summary

“Girls in Cyberspace: Dangers and Opportunities” examines both the challenges and empowering possibilities facing girls when accessing ICTs (Information Communication Technologies). In many ways, technology has facilitated girls’ ability to do what they were already doing: connecting, learning and sharing. ICTs have also increased their opportunities to do these things and to interact beyond their immediate communities. Although adolescent girls are not a homogenous group, and the way they choose to interact with ICTs may vary according to their location, social-economic status, capacity for mobility and personal inclination, there are some common threads emerging from Plan’s analysis.

ICTs can have an empowering effect on girls as they go through puberty: ICTs have exposed adolescent girls to new ideas and ways of thinking that open up possibilities for learning, networking, campaigning and personal development. At the same time, ICTs can also have negative consequences as they increasingly provide strangers with access to a girl’s personal space and allow for exploitative practices that can harm girls in faster and more immediate ways than ever before. On-line patterns of behaviour are a reflection of the way that society operates off-line. This paper will examine how attitudes towards empowerment and the abuse of adolescent girls reveal themselves through technology.

Based on original research undertaken in Brazil by Plan for the 2010 “Because I am a Girl” report (together with the Child Protection Partnership), this paper will outline the opportunities ICTs provide adolescent girls and analyze the potential dangers and exploitative behaviours that are facilitated through them.

To conclude, we draw out the main policy recommendations for and with adolescent girls to make cyberspace safer. Greater knowledge about ICT-related sexual exploitation and violence against girls is needed, and more emphasis on prevention and stronger international standards is critical. We call on various sectors to do more to protect girls on-line and to ensure girls have the capacity and knowledge to protect themselves and each other. Adolescent girls must be empowered to use the Internet and other communications technologies safely, on their own terms and in ways that promote their overall development and build their future possibilities.

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Section 1 – The Digital Revolution/Evolution: Adolescent girls and new technologies

Plan's "Because I am a Girl" reports have been tracking the state of the world's girls since 2007, highlighting a different topic each year, from girls in conflict to girls and the global economy. Now in its fourth year, "Because I am a Girl: the state of the world's girls 2010" is analyzing new global arenas of rapid change that are adversely affecting girls and, at the same time, offering new opportunities for economic, educational and social empowerment. One of these arenas of fast-paced, dynamic shifts is ICTs (Information Communication Technologies). It is within the context of evolving technologies such as cellphones and increased global Internet connectivity that girls are coming of age. The existing process of a girl's puberty is being experienced through, and influenced by, these new technologies. As increasing numbers of adolescent girls interact with cellphones and the Internet, we ask: What are the possibilities for empowerment that this interaction offers? And what are the dangers of exploitation and abuse that are facilitated through these new avenues of communication?

In order to understand this process, and to hear what girls themselves are saying about their experiences on-line, Plan commissioned the International Institute for Child's Rights and the Child Protection Partnership to undertake research with adolescent girls in Brazil. This paper brings to light some of the findings of this research and offers a glimpse into the wider analysis of girls and ICTs that will be included in the "Because I am a Girl" report (2010).

Defining adolescence

Each girl experiences life differently based on her particular situation, but there are some universalities to how adolescent girls experience puberty. These shared elements allow for an analysis of girls' common vulnerabilities. Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to womanhood, a time of "sexualization."¹ It is during adolescence that girls' vulnerabilities become both heightened and consolidated. "Puberty triggers a marked divergence in gender based trajectories, usually resulting in greater possibilities for boys and greater limitations for girls."² Puberty is a significant social marker for girls. The social analysis of adolescent development shows that around the age of 12 years, girls' lives begin to change critically and irrevocably.³ How girls are able to deal with these transitions depends heavily on family, cultural, national, social, economic and political context. Sexual maturity not only changes a girl's appearance and the way she views herself, but also how she is treated by her family, peers and society.

This paper examines both of the ways in which ICTs reflect and drive this process: how ICTs can mitigate the challenges girls face during puberty on the one hand, and how technology can exacerbate adolescent girls' vulnerabilities on the other. While this paper focuses on girls, it acknowledges that some of these challenges also affect boys. Virtually all the girls and boys

¹ Ruth Levine, "Start with a Girl: A new agenda for girls health," CGDev, (2009), <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1422899>.

² Levin et al., "Girls Count: a global investment and action agenda," (2008), <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/15154>.

³ Judith Bruce, "The Girls Left Behind: Outside the Box and Out of Reach," AIDSLink, Issue 101, (February 1, 2007).

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who participated in the Brazil study believe there is more danger on-line for girls than boys but acknowledge dangers for boys do exist.⁴

Context

During the last decade, ICTs have revolutionized our world. They have changed the way billions of people work, communicate, network and spend their leisure time. ICTs can include the whole range of technologies used for communication, from the telephone and radio to the latest social networking technologies. The World Bank definition is “the hardware, software, networks, and media used to collect, store, process, transmit, and present information in the form of voice, data, text, and images.”⁵ These technologies are changing all the time, with an increasing convergence of computer-based, multi-media and communications technologies, allowing cellphones to be used much like a computer.⁶ In this paper we will be mainly looking at computer based Internet access and cellphones, which as we will see, are the technologies most used by adolescent girls around the world.

The inevitable ubiquity of ICTs means adolescents across the globe, even in some of the poorest countries, will soon have access to mobile technology and the Internet. Although most countries still show signs of a gender divide in accessing these technologies, this divide is closing fast, in part due to the demand of adolescent girls themselves, who are keen to use these new technologies.

Cellphones and the Internet are probably the fastest growing technologies, connecting millions of people around the world. In 1996, there were around five phones per 100 people and, by 2009, 67 people in every 100 had a cellphone. During the same period, Internet usage grew from three people in every 100 to 26 in every 100 across the globe. In contrast, the numbers of people with landlines remained static and even dropped. By the end of 2009, there were an estimated 4.9 billion cellphone subscriptions and a quarter of the world’s population was on-line.⁷

Currently, ICTs are being used in innovative and unanticipated ways in a number of different contexts. Together with cellphones, advances in GPS (global positioning systems), geo location and geo visualization,⁸ information sharing and on-line collaboration, translation technologies, low bandwidth adaptations, “crowd-sourcing”⁹ and “crowd-feeding”¹⁰ are converging and creating the potential for ICTs to change the world in ways that have not been seen since the advent of the printing press. ICT users are now encouraged to interact in the physical world with

⁴ Suzanne Williams, Luiz Rossi and Michael Montgomery, “Brazilian Adolescent Girls in a Virtual World,” Overview of Research Undertaken by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) and the Child Protection Partnership (CPP) program for Plan International (2010).

⁵ World Bank, 2009B, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Engendering ICT Toolkit website, <http://go.worldbank.org/Z0FVJM0HF0>.

⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/cherie-blair-liberate-women-ndash-give-them-mobile-phones-1917821.html>.

⁷ http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/Telecom09_flyer.pdf.

⁸ Geo location is the ability to locate things on a map, and geo visualization is the way of visualizing the geo located data on a map.

⁹ Crowd-sourcing refers to gathering data from the general public via mobile or social media channels.

¹⁰ Crowd-feeding is a method of dissemination that enables information gathered during crowd-sourcing to be immediately available to those that produce it for rapid decision-making.

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individuals they have met in the virtual world. Twitter has brought about “tweetups” (Twitter slang for a “meetup”), where users who follow each other on Twitter get together in person. Foursquare lets users check in at locations and receive points and badges for letting others see their location. This software essentially allows on-line strangers to find each other off-line and moreover allows these strangers to track someone’s location and movement.¹¹ These advances represent a massive shift in how information and media are produced and shared, and offer all of us, including young people, the social space to engage on-line rather than simply receiving a broadcast.

Young people are facing new challenges in learning to protect themselves in the context of these rapid technological advances, and adults must also learn to support that protection. When asked in the Brazil research how she could keep herself safe on-line, one 13-year-old girl stated, “People have security, even knowledge of who is talking, and their parents by the way should keep an eye on their children.”¹²

Increasingly, cellphones are equipped with a GPS locator. Users may subscribe to a service that allows them to track someone’s movements as they go about town, giving the subscriber the ability to locate any GPS-enabled cellphone that is included as a contact. Tracking individuals is very similar to using a GPS tracking device, but does require installation, which is easily accomplished by providing an individual with a new phone. If the installer knows how to connect the cellphone to the car battery, then it does not have to be removed from the vehicle every two or three days for recharging.¹³ This has clear implications as potential danger for anyone, including adolescent girls.

Google’s new Twitter-like tool, Buzz, was introduced as an automatic opt-in feature within the highly popular Gmail¹⁴. Buzz created a privacy scandal when it was launched because it openly revealed information to others about who a user most commonly e-mailed. These invasions of privacy all carry potential dangers that the sheer excitement of using new technology can obscure, and that put adolescent girls uniquely at risk for reasons we will explore in Section 3.

ICTs are changing at such a rapid pace that the majority of young people are not aware of the changes taking place and how they affect their protection rights. At the same time, without accessing these technologies, adolescent girls will be missing out on a crucial opportunity to build 21st century skills and participate in this technologically innovative moment in time.

Literacy now is not just learning to read and write but learning how to use a computer.
– Rana Mohamed, age 16, Alexandria, Egypt¹⁵

How do ICTs change the way girls experience adolescence?

¹¹ <http://blog.streamcreative.com/2010/02/26/using-foursquare-for-a-purpose/>.

¹² Plan International, “Because I am a Girl,” Report 2010 (forthcoming)

¹³ B. Hopkings, “How to Use GPS to Track a Cell Phone,” (2009)

¹⁴ <http://www.privacylives.com/privacy-questions-surrounding-google-buzz-social-networking-service/2010/03/15/>

¹⁵ Plan International, “Because I am a Girl,” Report 2010 (forthcoming)

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I was not computer literate when I started using Internet on my mobile phone, so it was quite an eye opener. Now I want to learn everything; my uncle bought a computer two months ago, and his wife has been teaching me some basics.

– Patience, a young refugee from Zimbabwe, living in South Africa¹⁶

ICTs break down isolation and facilitate access to outside world.¹⁷ This is of particular importance during adolescence when girls are experiencing rapid changes. Indeed, speaking out and contacting peers is a vital part of the dynamics of adolescence. But the way that an adolescent girl communicates is different from the way that she does so as a child based on her evolving capacity. She wants to talk more to her female peers and less to her parents. Boys become alien and attractive at the same time.

Access to on-line social interactions can provide safety in anonymity: a platform that is both public and private at the same time.¹⁸ An adolescent girl may turn to the Internet for refuge. Here, she can say things that she might not say to a family member or a teacher. She can even explore different personas and identities. She is speaking into a public place yet may want to remain hidden and private at the same time. For girls who are confined to their homes, ICTs mean that they may still be alone but are no longer isolated; they have a window on the world. ICTs can give an adolescent girl a place to claim her voice.

Parallels can be drawn here with literature that sees ICTs as a space where identities can be constructed, cast off and re-constructed. Evidence suggests that girls find it easier to express their thoughts and emotions on-line and can play with their shifting identity and sexuality without fear of being labeled “off-line.”¹⁹ ICTs allow girls to say what they like on-line to each other and to the world. “As cultural producers through this new media, girls are in a more powerful position than ever before to resist mass culture’s constructions of femininity, girlhood, and sexuality. As many girls themselves will acknowledge, the Internet is an easy place to enact sexuality, and sexuality among adolescents may be played out in various ways on-line, whether through photos they post of themselves, through the language they use in their blogs and poetry, or through the sound clips they may use on their MySpace homepage.”²⁰ At the same time, on-line information is a reflection of mass communications and can reproduce stereotypical portrayal of traditional gender roles.²¹

¹⁶ J. Donner and S Gitau, “New Paths: Exploring Mobile-Centric Internet Use in South Africa,”

http://mobileactive.org/files/file_uploads/final-paper_donner_et_al.pdf.

¹⁷ http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1259&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

¹⁸ S. Stern, “Gender Constructed Online, Stereotypes Reified Offline: Understanding Media Representation of Adolescent Girls on MySpace,” (2008),

http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/2/0/6/pages172064/p172064-5.php, (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹⁹ S. Stern, “Gender Constructed Online, Stereotypes Reified Offline: Understanding Media Representation of Adolescent Girls on MySpace,” (2008),

http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/2/0/6/pages172064/p172064-5.php, (accessed April 10, 2010).

²⁰ S. Stern, “Gender Constructed Online, Stereotypes Reified Offline: Understanding Media Representation of Adolescent Girls on MySpace,” (2008),

http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/2/0/6/pages172064/p172064-5.php, (accessed April 10, 2010).

²¹ D. Buckingham and R. Willet, “Digital Generations: Children, Young People, and New Media,” (2006), New Jersey, USA.

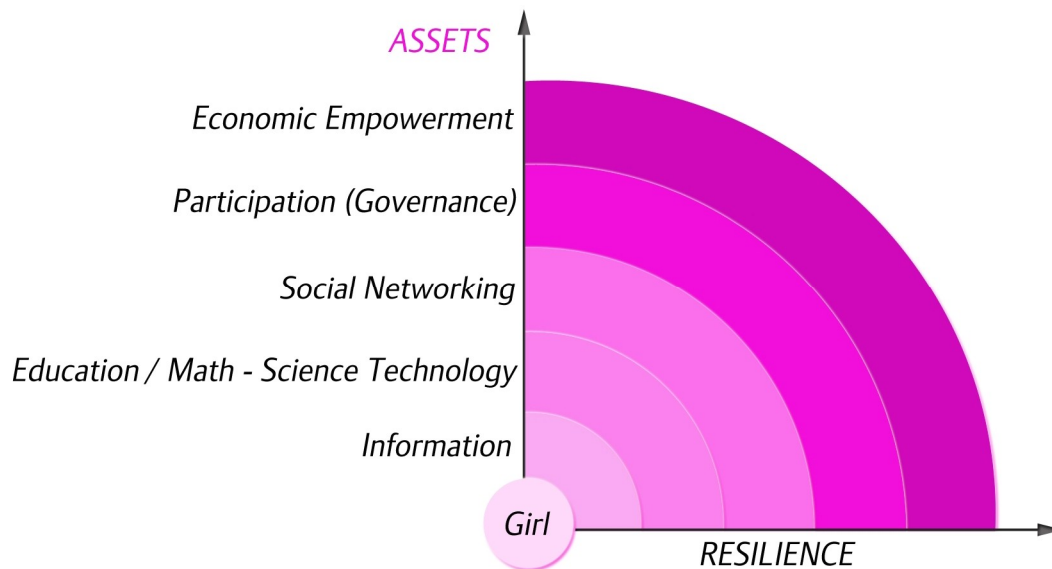
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The interaction with ICTs during puberty has clearly changed the way girls experience some aspects of adolescence, allowing them increased freedom to express their shifting concepts of identity and sexuality. It has provided them with opportunities to communicate with peers that only a generation ago were not possible. In the section below, we look in detail at the possibilities for girls' empowerment through ICTs and the critical role they play during a girl's adolescence.

Section 2 – Building Skills: Why technologies are important for adolescent girls

As many technologies become cheaper and easier to access, even in the most remote rural areas of developing countries, it is crucial that adolescent girls and young women as well as young men are able to benefit from their use. This means not only having access to the technologies, but to the skills and expertise to be able to use them to full effect – and to know how to keep safe while doing so.

However girls choose to use ICTs, they have the opportunity to build their skills through these technologies. Technology can also be used as a specific tool for overcoming some of the main challenges that girls face when entering adolescence. Overall, the skills that adolescent girls can develop through and with ICTs build their resilience, allowing them to mitigate some of the challenges posed by puberty. This gradual process is shown in the following diagram.²²



Overall, access to technologies can help progress towards the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), counter gender inequality and build adolescent girls' assets. There are seven specific reasons why these technologies are important to adolescent girls. First, to keep in touch with others, which reduces their isolation in countries where this is an issue. Second, in order to further their education and acquire new skills. Third, so that they can take an active part in their

²² Plan International, "Because I am a Girl," Report 2010 (forthcoming)

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communities and countries. Fourth, in order to have the skills to find work. Fifth, to build specific skills and knowledge on subjects they might otherwise not know about such as HIV/AIDS. Sixth, because evidence has shown that learning to use these technologies can build self-esteem. And finally, last but definitely not least, in order to keep safe. We've explored some of these reasons in more detail here.

Information

The Internet in particular plays an important role in exposing adolescent girls to new information. This in turn allows adolescent girls to question, challenge or critically assess the information being given to them by their communities, schools or even families. In conservative societies where social norms restrict girls' freedom and movement, independent critical thinking is a key skill for negotiating discrimination. Through the Internet, adolescent girls can read on-line newspapers and access media channels that are not provided in their countries or that may be forbidden.²³ Roza lives in Syria and has a speech disorder and learning disabilities. Via the Salamieh Telecentre, she learned to design brochures, make presentations and access the Internet to chat with her friends. Now she says, "I am no longer imprisoned behind the bars of my isolation. Salamieh Telecentre is my second home; it has become a part of my life. I am disabled, but I am not disqualified."²⁴

Girls are using ICTs for many reasons, including socialization. ICTs have been effective sources of information, including Ushahidi and Frontline SMS, which enable young people who have cellphones to report instances of violence on an ongoing basis via text messages. This information has enabled a mapping of the prevalence of violence, creating an evidence base for appropriate policy actions. For adolescent girls in particular, the ability to report violence by sending a text message, which can be done quietly and often anonymously, is a powerful tool for their protection.²⁵

Education

Technology plays an important role in facilitating quality education. A range of school networking projects that promote access to ICTs in schools have sprung up over the past three years in many countries, including Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, although not all have a gender perspective. Recognizing this fact, some programs such as SchoolNet Uganda have targeted girls-only schools to install computer labs.²⁶

For adolescents who might not have access to information elsewhere, ICTs are intrinsically linked with enabling them to exercise their right to comprehensive sexuality education, including sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention. A young woman in Mauritania highlighted

²³ Coumba Gadio, "Exploring the Gender Impacts of World Links in Some Selected Participating African Countries: A Qualitative Approach," WorldLinks, (2001).

²⁴ Studies Centre for Handicapped Research, Syria, <http://www.caihand.org>.

²⁵ <http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/-/440808/683686/-/4plo8t/-/index.html>.

²⁶ Shafika Isaacs, "IT's Hot for Girls! ICTs as an instrument in advancing girls' and women's capabilities in school education in Africa," United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting on "Information and Communication Technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women," Seoul, Republic of Korea, November 11-14, 2002.

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this when she noted that “The Internet represents a partner with whom communication can be done without fear, limitations or shame. We can learn about our bodies, our sexuality.”²⁷ Girls can ask questions on-line and research ideas and issues that they might not feel able to talk about at home. For example, a project called Learning About Living²⁸ is using computers and cellphones to teach Nigerian teenagers about sexuality and HIV prevention. The Nigerian MyQuestion service is a free question and answer service that teenagers can contact by free text message, by email, and a toll-free voice number. Because it is an anonymous and electronic service, it removes the stigma and judgment that teenagers fear when asking for information.²⁹

Social networking and entertainment

Adolescent girls can use ICTs as a means of keeping in touch with friends and family and reducing the isolation that many young women feel if they are not allowed to socialize. This is a key capability that is denied millions of adolescent girls where mobility is curbed at the onset of puberty. For example, a number of cellphone projects have enabled young women to keep contact with the outside world after they are married, when normally they would be confined to the house.³⁰ One study noted that 70 per cent of girls in Mauritania put emphasis on the fact that the Internet provides freedom to them as women, since they no longer need to limit themselves to the controlled information given by their society and families.³¹

Participation in governance and communities

ICTs are a critical way of enabling adolescent girls and young women to influence their government and take part in decision-making at an international level. For example, the BBC notes that “Iran’s young opposition supporters have constantly turned to the Internet and mobile phone to communicate with each other and the outside world, organizing demonstrations and distributing images and news of violence against them,” despite government threats to block and prosecute those who did.³²

For girls and young women who may not be able to physically take part in political or even community activities, ICTs offer a unique opportunity to communicate with others, to campaign, to denounce human rights abuses and violence and to access information that they might not otherwise come across. The LKL (London Knowledge Lab)³³ is hoping to provide girls in rural parts of Kenya with the tools to design their own campaign. The appropriate technologies tailored to their needs put girls in the driver seat, thus empowering them twice: enabling girls to make their voices heard and enabling them to do so on their own terms. “The LKL is applying

²⁷Coumba Gadio, “Exploring the Gender Impacts of World Links in Some Selected Participating African Countries: A Qualitative Approach,” WorldLinks, (2001).

²⁸ http://www.learningaboutliving.com/south/young_people/personal_skills/self_esteem, <http://uk.oneworld.net/article/archive/9789>.

²⁹ http://www.learningaboutliving.com/south/young_people/personal_skills/self_esteem, <http://uk.oneworld.net/article/archive/9789>.

³⁰ Dayoung Lee, “Impact of Mobile Phones on the Status of Women in India,” Department of Economics, Stanford University, (2009).

³¹Coumba Gadio, “Exploring the Gender Impacts of World Links in Some Selected Participating African Countries: A Qualitative Approach,” WorldLinks, (2001) .

³² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8462857.stm.

³³Yishay Mor, London Knowledge Lab, in correspondence with authors of this paper.

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participatory approaches using mobile technologies for learning and empowerment in developing contexts. Mobile technologies offer unique advantages in terms of reliability, availability, mobility and personal ownership. They allow girls in remote locations to participate as equals in the global conversation. These advantages are multiplied in an environment where alternatives are scarce.”³⁴

Economic empowerment

ICTs have a financial value for older adolescent girls and young women, enabling them to find employment, set up small businesses using the Internet or cellphones, buy and sell, find out prices, find buyers and bank or access credit on-line. The unique advantage of computers and on-line spaces is that anyone can set up a website or start an on-line business with very little cost. “In today’s world, computers are the tools we use for work, to learn, to communicate and to find out about the world ... In terms of employment opportunities, with new jobs, 95 per cent are going to require some kind of technology,” says Wendy Lazarus, The Children’s Partnership, in the U.S.³⁵

Once adolescent girls are computer literate in Latin America, eastern and central Europe, South and Southeast Asia and South Africa, they see the computer industry as a route to independence.

- In South Africa, women hold 19 per cent of jobs in data communications and networking, 18 per cent in information systems and information technology management and 39 per cent in education, training and development.³⁶
- In India, women occupy nearly 20 per cent of the professional jobs in the software industry, including at technical and managerial levels.³⁷ They are also well represented in what are known as BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) industries such as call centres.
- In Malaysia, women make up 30 per cent of information technology professionals.³⁸
- Women constitute 20 per cent of the software industry in Brazil.³⁹

Many of these jobs may be in data processing or in call centres, but young women see them as opportunities to build different lives for themselves.

³⁴ Cherie Blair Foundation, “Women & Mobile: A Global Opportunity A study on the mobile phone gender gap in low and middle-income countries,” (2010).

³⁵ The youth of the Bresee Foundation together with The Children’s Partnership 2007, “Why Does Technology Matter For Youth? Community Technology Programs Deliver Opportunities to Youth,” <http://www.childrenspartnership.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=11243>.

³⁶ Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart, “Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study,” AED/LearnLink.

³⁷ S. Mitter, “Teleworking and Teletrade in India,” *Teleworking and Development in Malaysia*, Vol. I, Integrated Report, United Nations University/Institute for New Technologies Policy Research Project in partnership with MIMOS Bhd. and UNDP, April 1999, p. 2247.

³⁸ Ng, “Teleworking and Gender in the Information Age: New Opportunities for Malaysian Women?” <http://genvetech.ait.ac.th/gasat/papers/ngp.htm>, p. 6.

³⁹ UNIFEM and UNU/INTECH, “Gender and Telecommunications: An Agenda for Policy,” (2000), <http://www.unifem.undp.org/conferen.htm>.

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It is clear from this section that ICTs provide girls with important skills that will enable them to grow into active, empowered young women who will be able to deftly navigate the 21st century. At the same time, ICTs are enabling old threats against adolescent girls to gain new immediacy. We will explore the role ICTs play in facilitating and exacerbating exploitation in the next section.

Section 3 – The Dark Side of Cyberspace: Technology and sexual exploitation

ICTs are exposing adolescent girls to violent, exploitative and degrading practices at a time in their lives when they are beginning to develop sexually. With the increased blurring of on-line and off-line interactions, access to such practices is becoming a more immediate and dangerous trend. We know that the majority of children who are sexually exploited worldwide are girls,⁴⁰ and that one in five women report having been sexually abused before the age of 15.⁴¹ Although as one expert noted, “By and large, the Internet is just a new medium for old kinds of bad behavior,”⁴² ICTs extend abuse to a new arena, which increases the possibility of a wider public being privy to this means of abuse. On-line patterns of behaviour are a reflection of the way that society operates off-line. There is a darker side to new technologies, and cyberspace has become an arena where sexual predators can operate with impunity. The Internet creates new intimacies that seem safe, and so adolescent girls have become prime targets for new methods of abuse, including trafficking via the Internet, cellphones and other communications technologies.

For instance, mobile devices allow users to upload photos or videos instantly; they allow users to immediately identify where they are located, either through the Internet or through the use of a GPS. The possibility of snapping a degrading photo of a young girl and disseminating it widely is an immediate and frightening possibility.

For all victims, including girls, the recovery from the trauma of being exposed in such a way is even harder because they never know on whose computer screen the images of their abuse will turn up. In the background paper to the Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, John Carr writes: “This, in effect, makes the image part of a permanent public record. It could suddenly appear on the screen of their next-door neighbour or classmates. It may become part of the stock that is offered repeatedly for sale by on-line pornography sites or other types of real world businesses dealing in child pornography.”

Research undertaken in Germany⁴³ further demonstrated that in addition to the severity of experiencing on-line exploitation, a deficit in support and response to these abuses is effectively increasing the level of trauma. The main gaps identified include:

⁴⁰ UNICEF, “From Invisible to Indivisible Promoting and Protecting the Right of the Girl Child to be Free from Violence,” (2008).

⁴¹ World Health Organization, “Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence Against Women,” (2005), http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en.

⁴² John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: understanding the first generation of digital natives*, Basic Books, (2009).

⁴³ ECPAT International, “Report of the World Congress III against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents,” (September 2009).

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- Lack of experienced professionals.
- Lack of specific knowledge and expertise on the psychological impact on the victim.
- Limited access to services throughout the world.
- Lack of sharing of good practice among professionals both regionally and internationally.
- Lack of ability to build on existing structures, while acknowledging cultural diversity, to enable both recognition of, and response to, the needs of exploited children.

ICT enabled sexual exploitation – why are adolescent girls particularly vulnerable?⁴⁴

Adolescent girls are vulnerable to on-line abuse for the same reasons they are vulnerable to off-line abuse. Physically, puberty is when girls begin to be seen as sexually available. Psychologically, many adolescent girls are not yet equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to protect themselves; for example, they may give out information on-line that they wouldn't share in another setting.⁴⁵ The speed of change and the fact that young people are now moving in a world that their parents have little knowledge of also means that they have little protection from abuse. One study in the U.K. found that adolescents, particularly those in the 16- to 17-year-old age group, were in serious danger of "online seduction."⁴⁶ In the research conducted in Brazil for the 2010 "Because I am a Girl" report, when asked what advice they would give other girls to avoid a bad experience on-line, one girl said, "Be careful with clothes we wear when cams are opened."⁴⁷

Adolescent girls are also vulnerable to on-line solicitation or "grooming" (securing a girl's trust in order to draw her into a situation where she may be harmed).⁴⁸ This enables sex offenders to engage girls on many levels, from sexual chat to enticing them into physical contact. There have been many cases where predators contact girls on-line and then initiate physical meetings during which girls are emotionally and sexually abused.⁴⁹ If a girl goes willingly to meet a potential predator, this does not equal consent in recognition of national age-of-consent laws. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to this type of on-line solicitation.⁵⁰ The recent case of a young woman in the U.K. who was raped and murdered by a man she met through Facebook illustrates the real and present dangers these types of on-line solicitations can pose to adolescent girls.⁵¹

⁴⁴ The authors recognize that an increasing number of child abuse images are of children under the age of nine; however, this paper will limit its discussion to adolescent girls.

⁴⁵ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands, "A Study on Violence against Girls: Report on the International Girl Child Conference, 9-10 March 2009, The Hague, Netherlands."

⁴⁶ Internet Forum in the United Kingdom, "Chat-wise, street-wise," (March 2001).

⁴⁷ Suzanne Williams, Luiz Rossi and Michael Montgomery, "Brazilian Adolescent Girls in a Virtual World," Overview of Research Undertaken by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) and the Child Protection Partnership (CPP) program for Plan International (2010).

⁴⁸ UN General Assembly, "Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children," A/61/299, August 29, 2006, C.80.

⁴⁹ Donna Hughes, "The Use of New Communications and Information Technologies for Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children," Hastings Women's Law Journal, Vol. 13:1, pp.129-148.

⁵⁰ Internet Watch Foundation (See: Council of Europe), "Trafficking in human beings: Internet recruitment. Misuse of the Internet for the recruitment of victims of trafficking in human beings." EG-THB-INT, p. 28, (2007).

⁵¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/mar/08/peter-chapman-facebook-ashleigh-hall>.

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It is often the most vulnerable or marginalized girls who are at greatest risk. For example, a study in Latvia found that the most vulnerable potential victims were young women from ten to 22 years old, living primarily in the southern and Russian parts of the country where unemployment is high and prospects are poor.⁵² Research in the U.S. found that girls and boys who feel isolated, misunderstood, depressed or who lack support from family are most at risk from aggressive on-line solicitations and are likely to send personal information about themselves.⁵³

Factors increasing vulnerability

There are a number of factors that increase an adolescent girl's chances of being a victim of on-line solicitation and exploitation. Identified risk factors for aggressive solicitations include being female, using chat rooms, using mobile Internet, talking with people met on-line, sending personal information to people met on-line, and having already experienced off-line physical or sexual abuse.⁵⁴

A Swedish study looked at the number of 16-year-olds who had received requests for sexual on-line meetings and off-line encounters. Among the respondents, 46 per cent of the girls claimed that they had received such a request from an adult. Several of the respondents reported having received such solicitations both via the Internet and through other channels. The corresponding figure for boys was 16 per cent.⁵⁵

There is also clear evidence showing that there is a market for exploitative images of girls. Research⁵⁶ has suggested that "At any one time there are estimated to be more than one million pornographic images of children on the Internet, with 200 new images posted daily. One offender in the U.K. possessed 450,000 child pornography images. It has been reported that a single child pornography site received a million hits a month. It has also been estimated that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 pedophiles involved in organized pornography rings around the world, and that one-third of these operate from the United States."

This has to some extent driven a lot of the research into these offending behaviours. Most of what we know about the harms of new technologies to adolescent girls is taken from work on offenders, rather than victims. This was summarized by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R v. Sharpe* [2008]:

⁵² Council of Europe, "Trafficking in human beings: Internet recruitment. Misuse of the Internet for the recruitment of victims of trafficking in human beings," EG-THB-INT (2007).

⁵³ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands, "A Study on Violence against Girls: Report on the International Girl Child Conference, 9-10 March 2009, The Hague, Netherlands."

⁵⁴ ECPAT International, "Report of the World Congress III against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents," (September 2009).

⁵⁵ Brottsförebyggande Rådet. *Vuxnas sexuella kontakter med barn via Internet. [Adults' sexual contacts with Children via the Internet]* Report 2007:11. Brottsförebyggande Rådet. Stockholm. 2007 in ECPAT International, "Report of the World Congress III against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents," (September 2009).

⁵⁶ Wortley, R. and Smallbone, S. *Child Pornography on the Internet*. 2006. Accessed on 2 April 2010 and available from: www.cops.usdoj.gov.

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1. Child pornography promotes cognitive distortions such that it may normalize sexual activity with children in the mind of the possessor, weakening inhibitions and potentially leading to actual abuse.
2. Child pornography fuels fantasies that incite offenders.
3. Prohibiting the possession of child pornography assists law enforcement efforts to reduce the production, distribution and use that result in direct harm to children.
4. There is “clear and uncontradicted” evidence that child pornography is used for grooming and seducing victims.
5. To the extent that most child pornography is produced using real children, the viewer is in a sense an accessory after the fact to an act of child abuse by providing a market for it.

We also know that ICT abuse of adolescent girls is not limited to adult perpetrators abusing girls. There are also well-documented cases of ICTs being used by youth to harm and humiliate other young people. A recent case in the U.S. highlights this challenge as nine youth have been charged after bullying a girl on-line and in person.⁵⁷ “Sexting” is also an issue that has recently hit mainstream media. In the United States, there has been a growing movement to recognize that young people taking photos of themselves and distributing them to friends (sexting) should not be punished under existing child pornography laws.

In 2009, a 14-year-old girl from New Jersey was arrested and charged with possession and distribution of child pornography after posting dozens of sexually explicit photographs of herself on MySpace. Recognizing that this was not the intention of child pornography laws, “There’s a lot of confusion about how to regulate cellphones and sex and 16-year-olds,” said Amy Adler, a law professor at New York University. “We’re at this cultural shift, not only because of the technology, but because of what’s happening in terms of the representation of teen sexuality,” as seen on many television shows.⁵⁸ The peer-to-peer exploitation and abuse can also play into the hands of sexual predators who will have access to these explicit photos on social networking sites.

Brazilian Adolescent Girls in a Virtual World⁵⁹

Plan commissioned a primary research study in order to gain a better understanding of the lived realities of girls as they interface with ICTs. The research involved a series of four focus groups’ discussions that were held in two Brazilian cities, involving a total of 90 children (44 girls and 46 boys) ranging in age from 10 to 14 years. This was followed by the development, posting and analysis of a national on-line survey between March and April 2010. The survey results will be featured in the upcoming (September 2010) “Because I am a Girl” report. Below, we offer a first glimpse into the findings of the focus groups’ discussions.

The young people in the focus groups came from contrasting urban experiences in Brazil. Three of the groups involved students who lived in *favelas* (low income neighbourhoods) on the outskirts of one of Brazil’s largest cities, and attended schools where they participated in social

⁵⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/29/teenagers-charged-girls-suicide>.

⁵⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/21/us/21sexting.html>.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Williams, Luiz Rossi, Michael Montgomery, “Brazilian Adolescent Girls in a Virtual World,” Overview of Research Undertaken by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) and the Child Protection Partnership (CPP) program for Plan International (2010).

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and educational activities delivered by governmental or civil society organizations. The fourth group was composed of students from a private high school living in a middle class neighbourhood. Despite the significant socio-economic differences between the focus groups' participants, many of the responses about ICTs in their lives were similar. For example, most of the young people owned cellphones, with all of the young people from the private high school owning one, compared with two-thirds of the young people from *favelas*. Where the responses between the groups differed most was in how and where they connected on-line. All the students from the private school connected on-line at home or through school, while 80 per cent of the young people from lower income areas accessed the Internet mostly from Lan Houses (Internet cafés).

The girls were asked about the off-line environment in which they lived. Those from the *favelas* frequently noted the general lack of community policing and high levels of violence in their homes, at school or on the street:

In my neighbourhood there is no security and it has too much violence. This is very dangerous and the violence is especially dangerous at night.

– Girl, age 12, Sao Paulo

Some of these girls perceived Lan Houses as places of safety, while others did not. For example, some of the young people described how in some instances the Lan House owners locked the doors so that those inside were protected from the violence outside on the street. They saw the Lan Houses as safe because they were with people whom they could trust and who could protect them. In total contrast however, some girls identified dangers and risks at the Lan Houses that appeared to be badly managed. The risks mentioned included drug dealing and close contact with and attention from unknown adults. As one girl from a *favela* said:

What Lan Houses most offer is risk. Porno sites simply pop up.

– Girl, age 12, Sao Paulo

Even with high levels of violence and risks posed to children from both the *favela* and private school settings, opportunities exist to build stronger child protection practices both in the on-line and off-line environments. With one of the Lan Houses in the Sao Paulo *favela* offering a safe place to the young people and affordable access to the on-line environment, it may offer more than just digital access. There may be an opportunity to build a safe, social-educational base within these communities, and enforceable codes of conduct for owners of Lan Houses may be one way to encourage and strengthen the on-line and off-line safety of young girls accessing these spaces.

Also of significance is that the middle class children from the private schools who access the Internet at school and home appear to have more adult guidance or monitoring than the girls from *favelas*. Teachers and parents may raise awareness of, or acknowledge, the dangers that exist on-line. In a number of instances, young people noted that although it was annoying, they still felt that it was important to have guidance from parents. They expressed a clear desire to have parents more involved in monitoring their actions on-line, providing advice and helping them determine what is safe and unsafe.

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Safety and security when accessing ICTs

In many communities, adolescent girls are travelling to Internet cafés or Lan Houses to access the Internet. Regulated Lan Houses can be a safe community space; however, many women and girls cannot or may not have access to safe public Internet points. Home and family obligations, lack of transportation, low literacy and the perceived lack of value of technology keep many women and girls from accessing public Internet points.

Internet access points can be male-dominated with mostly male users and, for many women, particularly women in developing countries, this makes the public access points off-limits. Women and girls are concerned about:

- How a girl they may be treated by men and boys frequenting Lan Houses.
- The potentially violent material men and boys in the Internet house may be looking at on the computer.
- Social disapproval regarding girls' presence in a space alongside men and boys who are not relatives.
- Social requirements regarding public engagements involving a chaperone, when no chaperone is readily available.
- Social stigmas attached to girls who frequent Lan Houses as less-virtuous/dishonourable, jeopardizing their reputation and even their safety.⁶⁰

In summary, some of the main findings of the comprehensive research undertaken with adolescent girls in Brazil suggest that:

- While they may not appreciate the breadth of dangers from the on-line environment, girls have some awareness of potential on-line dangers, and this awareness appears to increase or decrease depending on socio-economic background.
- Experience of violence and abuse in their everyday lives off-line may cause girls to take increased risks on-line, and in many cases the girls who may take the greatest risks are the ones who do not have a guiding adult present to monitor their on-line experience.
- Widespread, targeted education initiatives that engage both girls and their families or other caring adults in the locations where the girls may access their virtual world (e.g., Lan House or school) may be a positive step for improving both their off-line and on-line environments.
- With the research showing that girls' on-line activity is devoted primarily to socializing and entertainment, there is a need to carve out spaces within these types of sites to help girls better protect themselves and each other, so they safely navigate the on-line environment.

Section 4 – Summary and Recommendations

Adolescent girls' on-line safety must be a top priority, not only for their families and caregivers, but also for their communities as a whole and for those in international decision-making

⁶⁰ http://www.coyotecomunications.com/development/women_internet_access.html.

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organizations and NGOs. When an adolescent girl is exploited on-line, it is difficult to trace and prosecute the offender as well as finding the girl and providing her with the necessary psychosocial and health supports she needs for healing. Not only are on-line dangers an abuse of girls' human rights, they are also preventing them from realizing the many benefits ICTs can offer them, especially during adolescence. The first line of defence must be comprehensive legislation. As we will see from the following section, national and international legislation has not always kept pace with technological advances.

Laws keeping up with technology changes⁶¹

More countries than ever before have been developing laws related to child abuse through new technologies. There has been a substantial advance in the capacity of law enforcement to respond both nationally and internationally, with an increasing knowledge that tackling the problem requires a multi-agency approach. However, the legal definition of what constitutes child pornography varies from country to country; some definitions are very clear, and other countries leave it open for judges to define.

Though it is difficult for the law to keep up with technological changes, the international standards are clear in imposing an obligation on governments to protect girls from the abuse, violence and exploitation that is associated with new developments in, and increased use of, ICTs. The challenge is for states to create the legal frameworks that are necessary to effectively ensure girls are safe in the new spaces opened up to them by ICTs.

There are several notable challenges associated with using the law to prosecute those who perpetrate cyber crimes. These occur at all stages of the process, from detecting the crime in the first place to taking a case through prosecution. One immediate barrier to prosecution of sexual exploitation, abuse and violence on-line is the lack of domestic legislation. Despite increased awareness of the problem, many countries still do not have adequate domestic provisions that criminalize relevant acts.⁶²

While the lack of national legislation is a significant problem, it can also be difficult to prosecute child sexual abuse and exploitation that takes place on-line due to the many different jurisdictions that are involved in the commission of an offence. For example, if an indecent photo is taken of a child, the crime takes place in the jurisdiction in which the photo is taken, in the jurisdiction of the server to which the photo was uploaded, and in the multitude of locations in which the picture is downloaded and potentially shared and viewed. Effective prosecution of those participating at any stage of the process of producing, disseminating and viewing child pornography can be limited by extradition laws that sometimes require that the relevant act has been criminalized in both the location from which an individual is being extradited and in the state to which they will be extradited.⁶³

Legislation must address and take into account the fact that girls are more exposed to the risk of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse through the channels of new technology. As the G8

⁶¹ Kristen Anderson and Ruth Barnes, Children's Legal Centre, Essex University, U.K.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ *ibid*

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ministers stated in 2007, “[b]ecause producers, traders, and collectors of child pornography can be found in any country, all countries must work together to solve the problem”⁶⁴

How can girls stay safe on-line?

There has been much debate about how girls can keep safe on-line, both from adult predators and from other children and youth. For instance, the Girls’Net project in South Africa⁶⁵ has provided some safety tips aimed directly at girls themselves:⁶⁶

- Never give your personal details to anyone you have met on-line. This includes the name of your school, pictures of yourself, the place you live, anything someone could use to identify where you live.
- Do not send pictures of yourself to anyone – even if they send you one first (it might not even be a picture of them).
- If the person you are chatting to insists on information, or keeps pressing you about your details – stop chatting!
- If someone keeps trying to call or chat, or threatens you, tell someone you trust and get help.
- Report people who use abusive language, harass or abuse you to the people who run the social network you use – the perpetrator can be banned from using it!

Our research in Brazil has clearly shown us that the off-line and on-line worlds are converging more and more with the advancement of technology. Girls who are vulnerable off-line are vulnerable on-line, and programs need to link with both worlds to provide holistic solutions. This needs to be acknowledged by teachers, families, service providers, institutional regulators and all those concerned with building girls’ resilience to on-line dangers:

1. Strengthen legal instruments and use existing legislation to ensure that adolescent girls are protected from on-line abuse.
2. Ensure that all ICT policies and programs take account of age and gender – all too often, children are a single category and girls’ needs are not accounted for.
3. Ensure that there is more research linking adolescent girls and ICTs – the ways the girls and young women are using ICTs – to ensure that they are benefiting as much as possible; the best ways they can protect themselves; and how perpetrators are using technologies to exploit girls and young women.
4. Ensure that governments require ISPs (Internet service providers) to report and remove abusive websites, and that ISPs have effective codes of conduct that take into account the needs of adolescent girls.
5. Work with the private sector to develop tools and technologies that protect girls on-line and develop their potential to use technologies safely.
6. Foster child-protection links in communities between the off-line and on-line environments with both the public and private sector. Policies and programs need to recognize the link between the lives girls live off-line and on-line.

⁶⁴ Ministers’ Declaration, “Reinforcing the International Fight Against Child Pornography,” G-8 Justice and Home Affairs Ministers, May 24th, 2007, p. 2.

⁶⁵ <http://www.womensnet.org.za/node/863>.

⁶⁶ <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/texting-and-sexing-keep-your-chats-safe>.

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7. Listen to what adolescent girls have to say – they are the digital generation. Involve them in planning and designing IT projects. Work with them on the best ways to keep themselves safe on-line; ensure that they have equal access with boys to the technology and skills that they need for the 21st century.
8. The future of ICTs needs to address the challenges to protection that already exist. As new technologies are developed, the protection and participation rights of girls need to be considered, so that they can be made aware of the implications of adopting new ICTs.

This paper has clearly demonstrated the possibilities for empowerment that ICTs have opened up for adolescent girls – and the immediate dangers these technologies are posing. Careful and consolidated effort by international institutions, private sector businesses, schools and families could ensure that girls build the skills they require to take advantage of these possibilities, while mitigating the increasing risks. The important role ICTs will and are playing in ensuring adolescent girls can access quality education, sexual and reproductive information and future employment opportunities cannot be overstated. These technologies are the future and they are here to stay. The only question remains – will the world work together to ensure that the violence and exploitation adolescent girls are vulnerable to in everyday life is not translated and exacerbated on-line?

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