Virtual Dialogue: Online and Mobile Training for Gender Equality
20th - 27th February 2015
Report

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Dialogues are online discussions aimed at promoting debate, dialogue, exchange of good practices, ideas, and information on topics related to Training for Gender Equality that respond to the interests, needs and motivations of UN Women Community of Practice in Training for Gender Equality. The CoP, with over 1300 members at present, provides gender experts and practitioners with an open forum for articulation and debate, as well as a clearing house of materials and information on Training for Gender Equality. The overall aim of the Virtual Dialogues is to develop effective and inclusive processes of collective knowledge production with the end goal of improving the quality and impact of training for gender equality and highlighting its transformative potential. This was the **fifth Virtual Dialogue** run by the CoP, following past dialogues on Training for Gender Equality and Beijing +20 in October 2014, Transformation through Training for Gender Equality in July 2014, Knowledge on Training for Gender Equality in February 2014, and Evaluation of Training for Gender Equality in July 2013.

What is Training for Gender Equality?
Training for Gender Equality is a transformative continuous learning process that aims to provide knowledge, techniques and tools to enhance skills and foster changes in attitudes and behaviors in an attempt to create an aware, competent society that respects human rights of all women and men.

The objective of this Virtual Dialogue was to reflect on key challenges, opportunities, tools and methods in online and mobile training for gender equality. To this end, it drew together experts, researchers, practitioners and others to discuss the strengths and challenges of such training. This discussion occurred in a context of increasing online and mobile training provision worldwide, but one which is simultaneously notable for a lack of substantive research into the relative possibilities of online and mobile learning environments in the specific case of training for gender equality. It also comes shortly after the launch of the UN Women Training Centre's eLearning Campus in October 2014, established as an online platform open to all those interested in using training or learning as a means to advance gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights. The key issues and objectives of the Virtual Dialogue are set out at length in its Concept Note, circulated widely before the Dialogue itself.

Departing from the format used previously, this Virtual Dialogue commenced with a Webinar, a live panel discussion in which three invited speakers gave short presentations explaining their experiences in online training and responding to key questions. Following their presentations, the Moderator, COP Consultant Dr Lucy Ferguson, posed additional questions to generate debate between the panellists. COP members were invited to submit questions to the presenters via a chat facility, which were posed by the Moderator to the panellists on their behalf. A recording of the panel discussion was posted thereafter to the COP and a dedicated discussion group formed to continue the Virtual Dialogue over the course of the following week. This was done to enable participants to share experiences of online

training for gender equality, either as trainers or participants; debate issues raised in the panel discussion; and raise further questions for reflection.

The aim of this report is to provide an analytical synthesis of the discussions during this Virtual Dialogue and to explore ideas for future research and debate in this area.

PRESENTATION BY ALICIA ZIFFER,
TRAINING PROGRAMME COORDINATOR, UN WOMEN TRAINING CENTER

Alicia Ziffer, Training Programme Coordinator at UN Women's Training Center, an expert in online training for gender equality, education, gender and public policy, designed the UN Women Training Centre's online I Know Gender course which she outlined during her presentation. This introductory course, a key part of the Training Centre's eLearning platform, was developed for all UN staff. It aims at introducing basic concepts on gender in the broader framework of human rights. It was developed via a participatory process involving collaboration between UN Women and various other UN agencies. The latter helped to review the course's content, structure, distribution of topics, designation of basic modules and ways in which the learning process should be complemented. Thanks to such collaboration, the course features a number of modules developed in partnership with different agencies, including modules on gender equality and the world of work (developed with ITC-ILO); Gender, Equality and Education (UNESCO); and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (UNFPA). Further modules are being developed in partnership with WFP, OHCR, and UNAIDS.

The modular structure of the I Know Gender course allowed for some adaptation of the learning process and responded to specific learner needs, while maintaining a standard approach for all users. The course comprises three core modules on basic concepts; international frameworks and human rights; and the gender architecture in the UN System. These core modules must be taken by all users sequentially, and can then be combined with other modules dealing with specific topics. Notable subjects include women's leadership and decision-making, women's economic empowerment, and violence against women and girls. A module on women peace and security, among others, is also forthcoming. The modules are all self-paced and most significantly, the course can be used by a very large number of learners. The course represents an interesting way to bring users onto the same wavelength and share basics ideas and concepts concerning gender equality, women's empowerment and their relationship to human rights frameworks.

Although the course's modules may not cover all learning needs, nor will it in itself be enough to promote all necessary transformative processes for gender mainstreaming, its potential as a tool to promote understanding and familiarise users with basic knowledge on gender should be highlighted. Launched in October 2014, the course is currently being evaluated and analysed with a view to improving its overall content and possibilities.

PRESENTATION BY DR KRISTY KELLY,
FACULTY MEMBER, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Dr Kristy Kelly, leader of Columbia-SIPA research project on training for gender equality and Faculty Member of Drexel University's School of Education, where she directs the online Global and International Education Master's Degree Program, spoke of the broader context of the online learning

space. She reflected on online and mobile learning as an opportunity for democratizing knowledge. She highlighted this as one its principle benefits, especially as people cannot always travel to training locations and thus are being left out. Online learning offers anyone with internet access immense access to information, including those who are not necessarily based in the Global North or within universities. Instead, they can live anywhere. Thus, online learning draws on experiences of practitioners in the field, policy makers and development experts. Thus both in terms of whose knowledge is disseminated and who has access to it, we see great benefits through the use of online training.

Challenges for online training include issues surrounding access and the pedagogies of learning. Training for gender equality involves very personal, psychological experiences that face limitations in the context of online platforms as compared to interactions in classrooms. In self-paced online environments there very little situated learning occurs, i.e. learning that we gain through interaction in a classroom setting. As such, there is a need to find ways of bringing home and work environments into an online space, and using these as meaningful places for reflection. This requires a great deal, both from instructors and designers, as well as from technology itself. This especially true given the added challenge of providing support after a learner leaves the 'classroom'. These 'classrooms' can either be synchronous, wherein learners learn together at the same time, or asynchronous, where learning is self-paced but users remain in dialogue with each other over a particular period of time.

Reflecting on her own experience, Dr Kelly noted that since students at Drexel University are based all over the world and have different personal responsibilities, the instructor plays a critical role and their work requires the investment of significant time and care to foster personal connections with learners. The support of technical colleagues who understand the importance of gender is also essential.

In terms of good practices of online learning, Dr Kelly drew particular attention to the issue of ethics. As online learning takes place in an anonymous, virtual space, there is a pressing need to ensure online safety for all participants. This is particularly true given that the anonymity afforded by online spaces enables users to express themselves much more freely than in a face-to-face learning environment. She also highlighted culture and language as issues that can offer both opportunities and challenges, and the need to pay attention to how certain cultures and languages are more privileged in an online space.

COP member **Juliane Drews** of UNAIDS asked Dr Kelly to expand on the notion that certain cultures are privileged in online spaces. Dr Kelly explained that sometimes culture becomes essentialized into country contexts and traditions. But online space is a culture of learning and inquiry. Cultures which are more privileged in an online setting constitute those individuals with more education, more able to think critically and better able to articulate their views, as in a face-to-face setting. However, online spaces require more written communication and therefore literacy which fits online spaces tends to get privileged. Online space is also an English-language dominated space. In this context, we forget that those who do not speak English may feel less comfortable. However, the freedom afforded by online communication, especially asynchronous context which afford more time to contribute to online discussions, helps to overcome challenges faced by those who don't speak English, including challenges experienced in face-to-face settings. Dr Kelly underlined the importance of helping learners when they come to the classroom and being reflexive about how power and privilege plays out in gendered ways, as well as in terms of class and culture, in online and face-to-face classrooms. The first step, she indicated, is sharing information and experiences. COP moderator **Dr Ferguson** also reiterated the importance of the language issue and indicated that questions had been posed by COP members surrounding translation software.

Johanne Lortie, previously a consultant in the field of information technology and gender issues, and currently the ITC-ILO Programme Officer responsible for managing residential and online courses, spoke of her involvement in online courses spanning nearly a decade. Her assignments have included the development of courses on international development in Sir Lanka in 2007 with the Ministry of Labour; courses in Haiti in 2009 with participants from government ministries and CSOs; and, most recently, courses in Burundi with participants from ministries and CSOs.

In developing countries in particular, online learning faces a number of challenges, whether in terms of tutored, self-paced or facilitated courses. In her experience in Burundi, for instance, the addition of a component requesting an online essay proved difficult given the added work this entailed for users, who already have full-time jobs and family responsibilities. The requirements of online course, therefore, became the very last of their priorities. Difficulties surrounding internet access also proved a challenge, notably for participants serving as government representatives in remote villages and districts. In response, the course turned to mobile learning, rather than relying on internet platforms. The instructors instead sent SMS messages to participants through a system offered by the private provider, Clickatel. This allowed instructors to purchase credit in order to send messages to participants. Thus, one way to overcome the main challenge of access in rural settings is to reach out to those with limited access by using the different communication technologies available. This enabled the project to be more inclusive and more creative in terms of the use of technology.

The online courses Ms. Lortie was involved in in Burundi sought to develop both gender capacity, notably gender responsive budgeting, and other aspects, such as the use of ICT. In her experience in Sri Lanka, part of the training involved developing the networking and written skills of learners which are incredibly valuable for online training. A lack of such skills is a major barrier, especially in an online setting, particularly for women.

While online training is not inexpensive, it is an effective means of reaching out to a wide range of people, especially women with familial responsibilities and mobility issues. In terms of lessons learned, she highlighted time commitment as a major consideration. Other considerations include the resources needed to put together and run and online training, especially given the high levels of support needed in terms of content, technology and administrative support. She inquired as to the kind of resources which COP members felt most important for moving forward with developing the online learning environment.

Following the presentation, COP member **Tamela Fish**, of the Environmental Forum of Marin, inquired whether the mobile learning in Burundi was bi-directional, i.e. whether the participants could send SMS messages back to instructors. Ms. Lortie responded that the SMS messages were only one way, as there was no way to provide SMS credit for participants to send messages back. This could be explored in the future. Instead, instructors would send participants questions, reminders and content and they, in turn, would have to use the internet to answer the questions posed, e.g. by trying to go online once a week.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

As new technologies are still not widely available to the majority of the global population, how can we work to increase the accessibility of online and mobile training for gender equality?

Ms. Ziffer underlined the importance of considering the possibilities that mobile learning brings to bridging gaps in access. While it may be relatively difficult to ensure access to computers or the internet, far more sectors are able to use or access mobile technology. As such, interesting possibilities are opening up in this sphere, despite differences across different regions.

Dr Kelly noted the interesting tension which has emerged with the development of new technologies, on the one hand, and the fact that this privileges those with access and knowledge, on the other. Another issue is also the fact that women and girls are often left out in terms of access. In her experience of working in South-East Asia, principally in Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos, even very poor women, particularly those engaged in trade, have mobile phones even if they have no amenities, such as electricity or water, in their homes. She emphasised the importance of working towards a basic level of access, and of mobilizing and using technologies that people already have, rather than newer, more limited-access technologies.

Ms. Lortie recalled the importance of access issues in rural environments. However, as those residing outside cities have cellphones, the project she was involved in was able to send SMS messages to participants. This enabled them to observe daily life and divisions of labour, as well as to communicate reminders to learners. She stressed the need for inventiveness to broaden the accessibility of online training, and to be on the lookout for new possibilities. The challenge is to know what tools are available and how to use them effectively.

Noting that accessibility is often thought of with respect to disability issues in US colleges, COP member **Allen Grant** suggested the need to be more careful about the language used when referring to access to online learning.

What tools and strategies can be used for addressing resistances to gender equality in an online setting?

Dr Kelly stressed the need to determine what kind of resistance is faced, e.g. resistance to being trained on gender equality or resistance to the concepts reflected in the content of trainings. She pointed out that spaces of resistance can be spaces of learning. Online spaces offer a great opportunity to introduce greater diversity and a broader spectrum of experiences into the classroom than most face-to-face settings allow, as this is only open to participants who are physically able to attend trainings at particular locations and at specific times. She indicated the need to study how learning is achieved, what exactly resistance constitutes, how to manage it, and what learning takes place as we move through resistance to a broader understanding of gender from both the trainer's and trainee's perspective.

Ms. Lortie indicated the forum format as a means of overcoming resistances. This is especially useful for enabling participants to share their ideas and experiences, thereby furthering the learning process. In her experience, there is little resistance to online gender training as in many cases participants are people already well-versed in gender issues. However, if it is mandatory for others, resistances be managed by deconstructing concepts through online discussions and pacing the course step-by-step in order to avoid alienating learners.

Dr Ferguson underscored the importance of distinguishing between different types of resistance, observing that the more we understand about different kinds of resistance, the easier it is to work through them in positive pedagogical ways.

How can we measure the impact of mobile learning through monitoring and evaluation?

This question was posed to the panel by COP member **Shruti Kapoor**, Founder of Sayfty, an organization which works with women and girls in India.

Ms. Lortie noted than in her experience, the project used a blended approach, combining a traditional web platform with mobile learning, rather than only mobile learning. Mobile technology was used to support an extant platform. Her project used surveys distributed among participants which specifically evaluated the use of SMS messages. The feedback confirmed that SMS messages were seen as a very useful means of keeping learners informed, especially those with limited internet access.

Ms. Ziffer confirmed that this issue was being worked on extensively at the Training Centre, noting that understanding the impact and results of activities remains a challenge for e-learning specifically and all types of learning in general. It is a key issue to determine not only the number of people trained the change this evokes and the impact this has. We must also know how to evaluate changes in training. Development tools and frameworks are used to document experiences, results and follow-ups. Impact is sometimes only visible years after a training intervention. She suggested another Webinar wherein experiences and good practices in this regard could be provided.

Dr Kelly emphasised the need to be cognizant of the purpose of any training. We assume that training will have a grandiose effect, but complications about in terms of measuring impact. We need to know what exactly we are providing the training for, whether it concerns educating people about basic concepts, or empowerment, or skills development, or developing networks and simply sharing ideas. As such, we must be careful about our expectations, be realistic about results and look for alternative forms of evaluation. She noted that Drexel University is using research journals for students in their courses; through such qualitative, longitudinal analysis they seek to determine how their ideas are helping to develop their sense of self and how the training effecting their professional spaces.

Dr Ferguson noted several further questions posed through the Webinar's chat facility which could not be discussed due to time constraints. These included:

- How can we work on digital finance to improve women's access to ICT tools?
- How can case studies in online learning be tailored to the specific needs of online learning environments?
- What is the average length of online courses?
- Are there any types of translation software available to reduce the linguistic divide in mobile learning?
- Is the I Know Gender course accessible to all UN staff? (Dr Ferguson confirmed that the course is open both to all UN staff and to anyone interested in gender.)

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DISCUSSION FORUM

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Benefits of online and mobile learning
The GGCA Secretariat noted online learning's potential to reach many more people than face-to-face training. It can also be more cost effective for end-recipients to participate in, as there are fewer travel-related and logistical issues involved. Training material can be recorded and archived and made available

for extended periods of time, thus allowing users to access it in their own time. One means of reaching those interested in gender training but lacking individual technological resources to participate therein is to a local library or community center with internet access as a site in which to host training sessions, thus enabling trainees to work together with both 'live' and archives materials.

COP member **Emougou** pointed out the value of such initiatives in an age when mass training needs are increasing for the empowerment of individuals, organizations and governments.

Importance of ICT's for women's empowerment
COP member **Mercedes Amador** questioned how technology can really help to empower young women, make them aware of their rights, and eradicate myths society retains concerning gender equity.

To a certain extent, this inquiry was answered by a comment made by COP member **Jihène**, who reinforced the importance of ICTs for women's empowerment, highlighting how social media tools can be harnessed to support training needs. She underlined online and mobile training for gender equality as a useful solution for women in remote locations, those with limited financial resources, or those otherwise unable to travel and participate in face-to-face learning experiences. The widespread use and development of ITC tools worldwide offers an excellent opportunity for remote learning, especially for women in rural areas. Mainstreaming gender in ITC policies can contribute to the achievement of several goals, such as furthering women's skills development, facilitating knowledge transfer, and enabling the development of women's networks. Existing online tools and platforms enable users to follow training courses and participate in discussions. Mobile technology is an especially easy means of following training courses given their widespread use. Moreover, social media can be used to further learning experiences, notably given its interactive nature.

COP member **Áurea da Silva Garcia** spoke of a mobile learning initiative to empower women in water management in the Pantanal region of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay, which works with 'Educomunication', i.e. popular communication to enable party leaders to use communications tools to help focus policies on water management.

The potential of mobile technology
Alicia Ziffer shared issues raised during Mobile Learning Week 2015[1], a global event organized by UNESCO and UN Women in Paris, France, including: the importance of statistics; the variety of possibilities presented by mobile technology, which encompasses both smartphones and more simple cellular phones, for training and learning processes; important role mobile technology is playing in bridging the digital gap; and the fact that technology is a tool that can lead to empowerment but is not a solution in itself.

Challenges of providing online learning experiences
Sheila Crook of XXX noted that the concept of democratizing knowledge resonates with her organisation's efforts to develop gender advocates working at the community level. Moving from traditional, face-to-face workshops and seminars to downloadable self-directed learning modules, the organisation has more recently shifted to live online webinars. While live coaching sessions work particularly well, the organisation has found that providing live introductory sessions on demand is not sustainable in the long-run. Although online webinars and mobile training have much to offer, current

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[1] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/mlw

challenges include keeping up with technological advances, securing technical support, and allocating the time needed to convert curricula into interactive, self-directed, web-based learning experiences.

The **GGCA Secretariat** underscored issues of access as a major challenge, as not everyone has access, or reliable access, to online and/or mobile technologies. Time constraints and trainee commitment may also present a challenge. Regardless of their location, abilities and good intentions, trainees may have more pressing commitments that cause them to drop-out of gender training courses. It is worth reflecting on how to keep learners engaged, e.g. offering a certificate of completion, and how to incentivize users who cannot complete training during the "live" time-frame to come back to archived training materials and develop knowledge at their own pace.

Experiences of developing online training courses

Fanny Bugnon from the University Rennes II in France presented the experience of a professional development diploma on gender equality. The interdisciplinary course[2] trains 20 trainees from around the world on gender and equality issues, through a course created to meet the demand for vocational training in gender. It uses online fora as one way of connecting students and trainers and enabling productive exchange. Challenges include time considerations, as learners work at their own pace, and spatial considerations, as the training offered is largely long-distance.

Creating cross-platform learning systems and new tools

The **Secretariat of the GGCA**, the Global Gender and Climate Alliance, reflected on how to create a cross-platform learning system that caters to multiple types of technologies: smart phones (including apps), non-smart phones (including SMS), and web based sites, programmes and applications. They discussed specific methods and tools for gender equality learning in online settings. In this regard, they suggest a virtual game-style scenario, based on the premise that the practical application of problem-solving involved therein can be effective in gender equality learning. The development of such learning platforms requires financial resources, but their practical application tends to yield positive results.

Other issues

COP member **Henrietta Mustapha** questioned whether gender training Is recognised in terms of job searches with international organisations.

Ananya Dasgupta raised the issue of male-female population ratios in countries and its relation to gender equality.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

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This Virtual Dialogue is part of an on-going process of collective analysis and evaluation of training for gender equality. The discussions and reflections contributed here will feed into wider debates in the UN Women Training Centre and also support analytical work and identification of priorities for future

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[2] http://www.univ-rennes2.fr/sfc/diplome-interuniversitaire-etudes-sur-genre

activities. Based on the findings of the Virtual Dialogue, a number of further questions or issues for future research can be identified:

- How can useful eLearning tools, such as the I Know Gender course, be developed further to enable transformative processes for gender mainstreaming?

- What has the impact of such courses and tools been, and how may this be accurately measured and evaluated?

- How can we ensure the safety of participants given that online learning takes place in an anonymous, virtual space, where users can express themselves often without restraint?

- How can we gauge the ways in which certain cultural aspects, e.g. language, are more privileged in an online space? How can this privilege be negotiated or overcome?

- Where and when are mobile learning platforms preferable to web-based platforms? Is there systematic information comparing the two in different contexts?

- How can mobile learning, for instance involving instructors sending SMS messages to inform students of course developments, be made more interactive?

- What is the nature of resistances to training for gender equality? How do these develop and manifest themselves in response to trainings? What kind of learning takes place as we move through resistance to a broader understanding of gender during training?