EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN IN SOMALIA THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

Website: www.ubahmedialab.org
Email: Info@ubahmedialab.org
Twitter/X: @UbahMediaLab
Instagram: @ubahmedialab
LinkedIn: Ubah Media Lab

Ubah media lab1

Abstract

This paper explores the transformative role of digital media in empowering young Somali women within a patriarchal and conflict-affected context. Drawing on Sen's Capability Approach and the concept of adverse digital incorporation, it examines how digital tools—such as TikTok, Instagram, and platforms like Bilan Media—provide avenues for self-expression, civic engagement, skill-building, and income generation. Through a qualitative analysis of user-generated content and institutional initiatives, the study shows that while digital media platforms can significantly enhance agency and opportunity, they also risk reinforcing existing inequalities through online harassment and exploitation. The paper concludes by calling for a holistic approach to digital inclusion that includes infrastructure development, digital literacy, and gender-sensitive policy interventions to ensure equitable access and use of digital media by young women across Somalia.

Methodological Note

The study employed qualitative content analysis of publicly available social media content created by young Somali women on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Ethical care was taken to anonymize specific user identities, particularly for accounts where women intentionally conceal their identities due to social constraints. Secondary sources, including reports from NGOs, UN agencies, and scholarly literature, were also used to triangulate insights and ensure contextual richness.

Visual Representation: Digital Access Gap

The chart below illustrates the disparity in mobile phone ownership and internet usage between urban and rural Somali women, highlighting a significant barrier to equitable digital empowerment:

Digital Access Among Somali Women
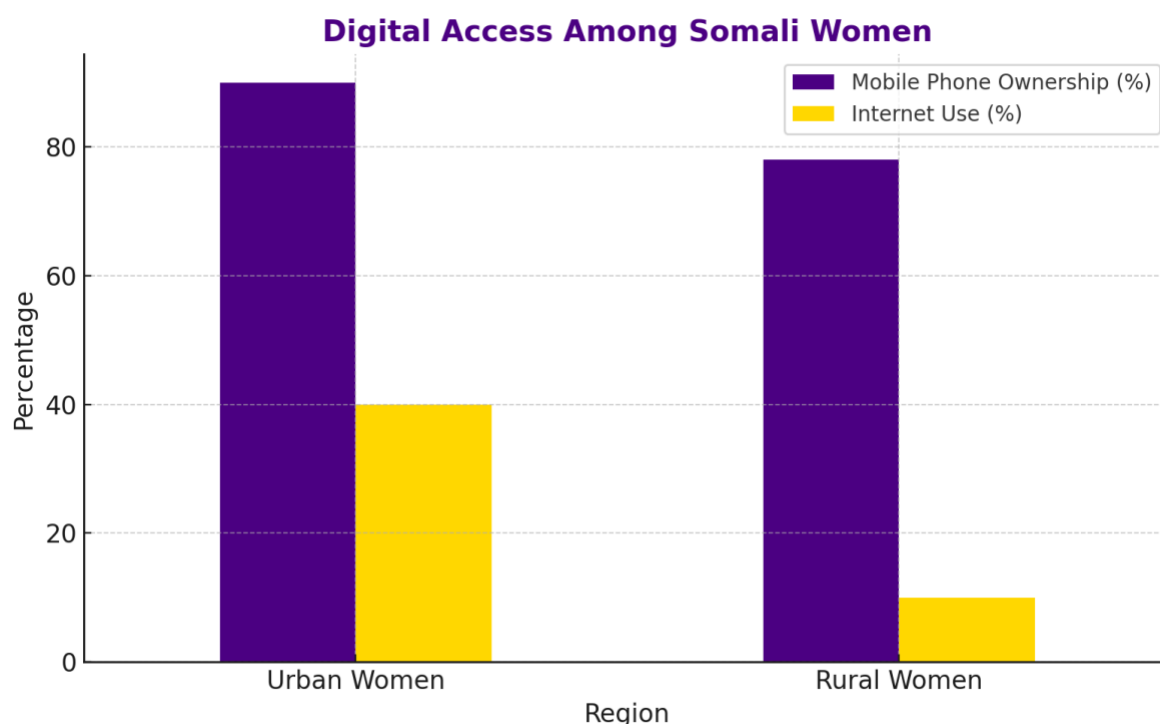
Recommendations

Expand Digital Literacy Training for young women, especially in rural areas, through community-based programs.

- Promote Safe Digital Spaces by introducing content moderation, legal protections, and reporting tools for online harassment.
- Support Women-Led Media Initiatives such as Bilan Media and grassroots digital storytelling collectives.
- Invest in Rural Connectivity through public-private partnerships to bridge the urban-rural divide.
- Integrate Empowerment Metrics that go beyond digital access—assessing meaningful participation, income generation, and voice.

Introduction.

Somali society is patriarchal and perceives women's roles in the family as integral to protecting their social values. A woman is often under the guardianship of an immediate male family member, such as her father, brother, or uncle, and later her husband when she marries (Mohamed, 2012). This practice, though intended to protect women's welfare, arguably leads to women losing their agency and restricting their societal roles to childcare and household chores. Since the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico City, although the country has struggled with civil war over the past three decades, Somalia has taken steps to improve women's roles in society, introducing a strategy such as "Women Quota" in the Federal Parliament, allocating thirty percent of the seats to women (United Nations, 2021; Omer, 2021). However, this representation is often described as ineffective and usually fails to address the challenges women face.

The proponents of digital technology platforms, such as social media platforms, have attributed a positive influence in creating opportunities for low-income countries and disadvantaged groups. However, skeptics still believe that the role of these platforms could also negatively affect these groups. In Somalia, many see digital technology, especially digital media, as platforms that offer women opportunities to create agency in challenging the patriarchal society and improve their socio-economic development. According to a World Bank assessment, about 84.5% of women over 15 years of age in Somalia own mobile phones, but only 24.7% have used the internet. Translating women's access to mobile phones and the internet into measurable, transformative access to a better quality of life remains challenging. Gender discrimination, social norms, and limited access to education and economic opportunities persist in the country.

This paper, while aligning with Haenssgen and Ariana's (2018) call for a more thoughtful understanding of technology within the Capability Approach, argues that access to digital technology, in this case digital media, enhances the agency of young Somali women to access information, political participation, knowledge, and socio-economic development. These digital

3

tools contribute to capability-building and informed decision-making, enabling women to challenge entrenched social norms and negotiate greater autonomy, despite the persistent limitations of digital spaces in fostering inclusive and equitable forms of participation.

While acknowledging the limited data available on digital media in Somalia, the essay will utilize balanced evidence on the impact of digital media access for young Somali women by conducting qualitative social media analysis on random content posted by Somali women who use social media such female social media influencers, women who own online stores or partner with businesses for commercial placements, and anonymous social media accounts run by teenage girls who do not want to disclose due to the social norms negatively affecting their agency in online spaces. Additionally, it will utilize reports from academic papers, NGOs, the UN, and civil society groups that focus on women's empowerment.

Literature review

Empowering Young Somali Women Through Digital Media.

The introduction of information and communication technology as key to development theories has led to mixed critiques on the role of digital technology in the socio-economic development of societies worldwide. However, a wide range of scholarly work has highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of digital technology. For young Somali women, in a country characterized by traditional gender norms and recovering from decades of conflicts, digital media presents unique opportunities and challenges for empowerment that warrant careful examination.

Digital Technology as an Enabler of Development for Women

Bailur and Masiero's (2017) study on women in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda highlights mobile internet as a vital tool for business expansion and efficiency through marketing, communication with customers and suppliers, market research, and access to online sales platforms. This finding is particularly relevant to young Somali women, who face infrastructural challenges and cultural constraints similar to their counterparts in other East African countries. In the Somali context, where security concerns and social norms often restrict women's mobility, these digital connections could be even more transformative.

The study also found that mobile money platforms have enabled women to manage their financial transactions securely - an observation that holds special significance in Somalia, where mobile money platforms are widely used and could provide young women with financial independence outside traditional family structures. However, the authors highlighted challenges including data costs, digital literacy, unstable connectivity, social norms, and security concerns (Bailur & Masiero, 2017). These challenges are particularly acute in Somalia, where network infrastructure has been damaged by conflict and where cultural restrictions on women's technology use may be more pronounced than in neighboring countries. To address these challenges, targeted interventions to improve digital literacy and affordability and address social barriers are crucial - interventions that would need careful cultural adaptation in the Somali context.

Critical Perspectives on Digital Inclusion in Patriarchal Contexts

4

Heeks' (2022) concept of "adverse digital incorporation" challenges the traditional digital divide framework, arguing that inclusion in digital systems can paradoxically increase inequality in the Global South. Unlike Bailur and Masiero (2017), Heeks argues that more-advantaged groups extract disproportionate value from less advantaged groups through digital systems that streamline exploitation, commodification, cost-shifting, surveillance, and enclosure of knowledge. This analysis is particularly pertinent for young Somali women, who may be disadvantaged by gender norms within their communities and by global digital platforms that extract value without providing equitable returns. This reconceptualization shifts focus from access to digital resources to how users contribute value, emphasizing relational dynamics between groups. When applied to Somalia's clan-based social structure and pronounced gender hierarchy, this framework helps reveal how digital platforms might reinforce existing power dynamics rather than disrupt them. This suggests that mere access to smartphones or social media accounts will be insufficient for young Somali women without addressing deeper societal power structures that limit their agency.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Technology in the Somali Context

Haenssgen and Ariana (2018) propose a more complex understanding of technology within Sen's Capability Approach, which focuses on individuals' abilities to achieve the lives they value. This framework distinguishes between having access to technology and being able to use it to achieve valued goals meaningfully. The authors introduce technical objects as generative and transformative dimensions, mediated by "technological conversion factors" - the broader socio-technological context influencing how technology shapes capabilities. In Somalia, these conversion factors include clan relationships, religious interpretations, security situations, and familial authority structures.

Haenssgen and Ariana (2018) rural India and China research found that mobile phones' impact on healthcare access is mediated by social norms, infrastructure, and user skills - phones might help overcome spatial barriers but reproduce inequalities due to gendered usage patterns or poor connectivity (Haenssgen and Ariana, 2018). In Somalia, similar dynamics may emerge where digital media enables some young women access to educational content or entrepreneurial opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing inequalities between urban and rural women or between. This context-specific framework is valuable for examining how digital tools interact with broader development goals for young women in Somalia's unique cultural landscape.

However, in the Somali context, issues such as a lack of data on women's access to digital technology, both in rural and urban settings, limit balanced arguments on the impact of digital media on Somali women. Additionally, as Mackey and Petrucka (2021) found, there is no consistent definition or measurement of "empowerment" across studies, with many using vague concepts like self-esteem or self-efficacy. This definitional challenge becomes even more pronounced when studying young Somali women, whose understanding of empowerment may differ significantly from Western conceptions due to Somalia's unique cultural and religious context. While technology offers potential benefits, the persistent gender digital divide continues to exclude marginalized women, especially those without access to devices or skills. In Somalia, where female literacy rates remain lower than male rates and young women in rural areas face particular disadvantages, this digital divide may be especially pronounced.

The authors argue that without addressing access gaps and definitional clarity, the empowerment potential of ICTs remains limited, with many studies focusing on women who already have technological access while sidelining the most disadvantaged (Mackey and Petrucka, 2021). This

5

insight is crucial for Somalia, where research might easily focus on relatively privileged urban women while overlooking the majority who face greater barriers. Achieving true empowerment requires technological availability and social, economic, and policy changes to genuinely expand opportunities for all women, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals. This underscores the need for holistic approaches that address technology access, literacy, social norms, and economic opportunities for young Somali women.

Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok offer seamless communication without physical presence, reducing barriers to education and information across societies. For young Somali women, these platforms may offer rare spaces for self-expression, networking, and learning outside traditional gender constraints. Mobile internet use offers improved economic opportunities and market access, particularly valuable in Somalia, where markets may be gender-segregated or physically inaccessible due to security concerns. However, challenges beyond access exist- in Somalia, these might include surveillance of women's online activities by family members, potentially reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal control.

Haenssgen and Ariana's (2018) framework offers a nuanced approach to understanding digital media in women's empowerment in Somalia's patriarchal society. This framework posits that access to digital tools sets off a chain reaction, mediated by resources and real-world conditions, creating opportunities, achievements, and ultimately greater agency. Each stage builds on the previous one, with unique constraints and potentials due to Somalia's socio-cultural context. When interpreting findings about digital media use among Somali women, I will examine how access to digital tools enhances their real opportunities—their "capabilities"—to achieve valued goals like education, self-expression, economic participation, or social connection. For young women in Somalia, digital media might function not merely as communication tools but as alternative spaces where traditional gender constraints can be negotiated, challenged, and potentially transformed through exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities for self-expression restricted in physical spaces.

Discusion

Digital media as a technical object and input

Digital media provides young Somali women diverse information, such as news, educational content, entertainment, and communication networks with peers. Such platforms include Bilan media platform, a women-led media platform in Somalia. In 2021, it was established through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the first all-women media crew in the country. UNDP implemented the programme in the country, and a local TV and Radio station hosts the all-women media crew programme.

Initiatives like Bilan Media leverage digital platforms to produce and distribute news and features, ensuring women's voices and stories are heard. Bilan's content is distributed online, becoming the primary source of information for millions of Somalis. This gives young women diverse perspectives and empowers them to stay informed and engaged. Such access enhances their ability to make informed decisions, participate in civic activities, and engage in broader societal discourses, aligning with the capability approach's emphasis on being informed and engaged.

6

Bilan Media journalists utilize digital media to engage with like-minded individuals and participate in mentoring sessions facilitated through online platforms. The crew has received mentoring and media training from world-class journalists who have worked at renowned news agencies such as BBC, ITV, and The Guardian (Harper, 2025). These trainings offer valuable skills development opportunities that would have been difficult for young Somali women to access without mediated communication platforms. Additionally, these initiatives have reduced barriers for Somali women to access education in patriarchal cultures like Somalia.

Digital media platforms also provide spaces that support women's education and skills development. For instance, the Somali Digital Media Academy, an institute dedicated to enhancing the skills of Somali women, hosts media training programs to empower them through film (Barrow, 2023). The Academy equips young women with basic filming skills, enabling them to use these skills for positive social change (Barrow, 2023).

In addition to Bilan Media and the Somali Digital Media Academy, many young Somali women use their personal social media profiles on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram to share skills with their peers or seek education and skills development opportunities. For instance, a popular TikTok account run by a young Somali woman uploads content that shares skills with young girls (TikTok user, n.d.). The account holder teaches women about modest fashion and makeup tutorials, presenting the content in an aspirational and culturally sensitive style that fosters social networks. The content, often recorded with smartphones, provides insightful examples of how digital tools empower young women while preserving their cultural identity by enabling self-expression, skill development, and community building. Such instances highlight how digital tools act as "technical objects" that enhance women's access to information, communication, economic activities, and self-expression.

Moreover, the use of digital media platforms by young Somali women, such as TikTok and Instagram, for economic activities and income generation has been on the rise. According to Gibson (2025), the digital economy provides significant opportunities for underserved communities by enabling access to education, markets, and green-collar jobs. In Somalia, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram play a significant role in the growing digital economy, enjoying massive popularity among entrepreneurs. Female social media influencers turned entrepreneurs drive digital media-powered economic activities in the Somali community. For instance, one young female influencer recently launched her fast fashion brand, inspired by her use of digital media platforms. Her account has more than tw million followers and initially uploaded content such as dancing, lip-syncing, and TikTok live sessions, which helped build her online personal brand and turned into an income source (TikTok user, n.d.).

There is a sizable number of young women whose TikTok profiles serve as compelling examples of how digital media empower young Somali women by broadening their opportunities across various dimensions. Through confident self-representation, TikTok user content projects agency and defies stereotypes, while wearing modest attire seamlessly weaves cultural values into their online persona. Some user accounts showcase baby products, highlighting income potential through promotion and bolstering financial autonomy. The content typically includes hashtags, store contact numbers, and the TikTok account username. Scrolling through these accounts often reveals various other products such as women's and kids' dresses, perfumes, and food places in cities like Nairobi, Mogadishu, and Hargeisa, indicating that the reach of such collaborations

extends beyond the user's locality. The content of these accounts also fuses Somali heritage with contemporary digital trends, reinforcing identity and preserving cultural roots.

Like most content on other popular TikTok and Instagram accounts operated by young Somali women in Somalia and neighboring countries, the content appears to be filmed with smartphones. These examples support Haenssgen and Ariana's (2018) concept of technical objects within the capability approach. They demonstrate that access to digital technology offers opportunities for young Somali women to improve their socioeconomic conditions, expand their freedoms, and pursue a life aligned with their values. This underscores how such platforms expand their freedoms, enabling self-expression, opportunity pursuit, and a life aligned with their values, solidifying their empowerment on a global stage.

However, it is also important to note Heek's (2022) concept of adverse digital incorporation, where access to digital media inclusion does not necessarily positively empower individuals. In the Somali context, women face multiple challenges in digital media spaces, such as online harassment, exploitation, and asymmetric power relations that are reinforced in online spaces. For instance, Nimo Happy's viral multilingual song "Isi Nafta" has been used over 100,000 times on TikTok (Isse, 2022)—without bringing her significant economic benefits—is a clear case of adverse digital incorporation. Nimo's song popularity shows inclusion in digital spaces, but this inclusion barely offered proportional economic benefits, copyright protection, or brand recognition. Nimo's case also supports Haenssgen and Ariana's (2018) argument that digital tools must be seen as means to an end, not ends.

Additionally, Somali women online face disproportionate online harassment, which would not have been possible without the generative impact of digital technology. For instance, based on the nature of the design of digital tools, many Somali women face threats from anonymous accounts threatening that they will taint their name by publishing fake nude images claiming they are of them (McVeigh, 2024). This highlights the negative side of digital inclusion, where technology facilitates new forms of abuse and exploitation. Such threats undermine the potential benefits of digital tools and reinforce existing power imbalances and vulnerabilities.

Digital Media's Transformative Impact on Empowering Young Women in Somalia

Women in Somalia face some of the most severe gender inequality globally. According to the UNDP gender inequality ranking, Somalia ranks fourth from last with a score of 0.776, indicating profound disparities that disproportionately impact the younger generation. The country's deeply patriarchal structure creates systemic barriers for young women in education, employment, and civic engagement (UNDP, 2023). These constraints are particularly restrictive for adolescent girls and young women, who face compounded challenges including limited educational opportunities, early marriage, and exclusion from decision-making processes both within households and communities. Despite national efforts, including a 30% quota commitment for women in the 2021-2022 parliamentary elections, representation remains low, and few women access these political spaces (UNDP, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021).

Amplifying Young Women's Voices and Building Collective Power

Initiatives such as Bilan Media and the Somali Digital Media Academy offer transformative dimensions that influence capability inputs and conversion factors specifically for young Somali women. These platforms address the isolation that has historically prevented young women from building collective power during their formative years when identity and aspirations are being

8

shaped. For instance, young women traditionally face substantial barriers in education, political participation, and professional spaces, particularly in media, as societal expectations pressure them toward early marriage and domestic roles beginning in adolescence (UNDP, 2023).

The establishment of women-focused, all-women media crews has strategically countered this isolation by creating physical and virtual spaces where young female journalists can connect, share experiences, and recognize systemic patterns in their struggles. Although hosted by one of the local media houses, the group has an independent editorial policy and holds regular editorial meetings and collaborative field reporting. These initiatives foster what feminist scholars call "power with" relationships—horizontal solidarity networks that transform individual challenges into collective action opportunities (Easy Sociology, 2024). As Laylo Osman, chair of the Somali Women Journalists Association, noted when explaining the history of media before Bilan Media: "The Somali media is a hostile environment for female journalists. They are frowned upon by a society that believes a woman's role is to stay at home, cook, and have children" (UNDP, 2023).

This collective mobilization has enabled women-led coordinated campaigns addressing issues particularly affecting young women, such as political participation, Female Genital Mutilation, and early marriage prevention. By creating safe spaces for young women to build professional relationships outside traditional male-dominated networks, these digital initiatives, such as Bilan Media and the Somali Digital Media Academy, are developing sustainable feminist organizing structures that extend beyond the platforms themselves and provide crucial alternatives during the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Enhancing Critical Consciousness in Young Women

Digital media initiatives also challenge this pattern by facilitating critical consciousness development tailored to young women's experiences. For example, in July 2023, Interpeace's Talo Wadaag II Programme organized specialized workshops targeting women and youth in Mogadishu that moved beyond basic skill-building to create participatory dialogue spaces. Through structured digital storytelling exercises, these workshops created safe spaces for women to connect personal experiences of discrimination to broader structural inequalities (Interpeace, 2023).

Women photographers, social media influencers, singers, and even teenage girls use digital media to share their views on key social issues. On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, young women share skills ranging from makeup tutorials to digital literacy lessons, always framed within culturally respectful aesthetics. What began as individual self-expression has evolved into collective action through the TikTok #naagnool (empowered women) hashtag, which translates to "empowered women." This hashtag has attracted over 1,400 posts on Twitter and over 26.4 million views across TikTok, amplifying women's roles in society, sharing resources, and coordinating responses to issues affecting young women (TikTok Hashtags, 2025).

These unorganized peer-to-peer networks operate with minimal resources—most content is captured on smartphones in home settings—yet create essential solidarity structures that transcend geographic and clan divisions. The hashtags they use demonstrate their collective power. Recently, a group of digital Somali community members, most of them women, led an online campaign that successfully pressured local authorities to arrest a police officer filmed slapping a young woman in Somaliland (Hiiraan Online, 2025). By negotiating the complex balance between cultural values and expanded opportunities, these digital platforms function as

"technical objects" that enhance capabilities while building the collective resilience needed to sustain individual empowerment efforts.

Challenging Representations of Young Women

Bilan Media has pioneered efforts to counter negative stereotypes of young Somali women through strategic content creation and distribution strategies focused on women's experiences. Rather than simply reporting on young women as victims of violence, early marriage, or beneficiaries of aid, their digital platforms consistently highlight diverse young female role models across professional sectors.

The impact of these representation shifts extends beyond digital spaces and explicitly targets women's development. These initiatives ensure that transformed representations reach diverse audiences by publishing stories on international platforms and social media channels and securing distribution through local radio and television in Mogadishu. One of Bilan Media's most recent successes is winning the Press Freedom Media Award at One Media World (One Media World, 2023), marking Bilan Media's transformative impact on Somalia's media freedom. Bilan provides a supportive environment for women journalists, countering harassment and exclusion.

Although Bilan Media's transformative impact on the representation of young women in the Somali community remains the most well-documented case inspired by digital media technology, user-generated content such as hashtags, online businesses, skills, and education platforms run by women are on the rise in Somali digital spaces. As access to the internet and digital technology increases across the region, more women are inspired to leverage these platforms for empowerment and development.

Influencing Social Conversion Factors for Young Women

Digital media initiatives are gradually shifting the social norms and attitudes that constrain young women's capabilities during crucial developmental stages in Somali society. The consistent representation of young women in non-traditional roles across Bilan's platforms is normalizing new possibilities for adolescent girls at the exact moment when their future pathways are being determined. For instance, an all-women media crew brings women into non-traditional jobs such as camera operators and media producers. These initiatives encourage women to take roles in traditional and digital media platforms. One Bilan Media journalist expressed: "Even though I am young, I am ready to leave my family in Baidoa and move to Mogadishu to work for Bilan. I want to highlight women's problems in my region, especially regarding political representation" (UNDP, 2023).

These digital spaces create safe "testing grounds" where young women can develop public voices and leadership skills before transitioning these capabilities to offline contexts, vital in a society where women's voices are traditionally marginalized. Many young women create online and digital spaces to express opinions on community issues through anonymous or semi-anonymous digital platforms before gradually building confidence to speak in physical community forums. Such profiles include teenage girls creating Instagram accounts to share content showcasing subcultures among young women and teenage girls in Somalia (TikTok user, n.d.; Instagram user, n.d.). These spaces offer safe havens for their users, and these gradual steps are critically important during adolescence when identity formation and confidence-building are central developmental tasks.

Digital platforms have also enabled dialogues on gender norms as they specifically affect young women. Bilan Media's ability to distribute women-focused stories through international media outlets, social media channels popular with younger audiences, and local radio and television stations in Mogadishu ensures broader reach across different demographic segments. This wide coverage and sharing previously untold stories from Somali women have led them to win global awards (UNDP, 2024). This multi-platform approach recognizes that digital transformation must connect to broader media ecosystems to effectively influence social conversion factors for young women across diverse populations.

Additionally, digital media platforms connect teenage girls and young women advocates with respected female elders, creating spaces for conversations that bridge traditional cultural values with emerging rights frameworks. The "#dumarland(Land of Women)" hashtag facilitates discussions among young women, male counterparts, and the broader digital community about evolving interpretations of women's societal roles. Approximately 3,700 posts have been created on TikTok with an overall view count of 51.9 million (TikTok hashtags, 2025), contributing to an online discourse on women's empowerment and gender in the Somali digital community.

The transformative potential of these initiatives extends beyond immediate participants to create ripple effects throughout Somali society, gradually shifting the social context in which young women's capabilities are recognized, valued, and enabled at precisely the life stage when such recognition has the most significant impact on their future trajectories.

However, significant barriers to access digital media, internet connectivity, and digital literacy severely hinder the transformative impact of digital media platforms like Bilan Media in rural areas where internet connection is unstable. This digital divide creates a stratified impact that disproportionately benefits urban women while potentially widening existing inequalities. Rural Somali women face compounding disadvantages, including unreliable electricity, limited cellular coverage, prohibitively expensive data costs, lower digital literacy rates, and economic constraints that force difficult choices between basic needs and connectivity. Additionally, there has been a ban on internet coverage in areas controlled by Islamist groups (Reporters Without Borders, 2014).

These challenges exemplify Heeks' (2022) concept of "adverse digital incorporation," where technological advancement can paradoxically reinforce existing power structures rather than disrupt them. Alternative strategies for women's empowerment, such as increasing internet coverage in rural areas and implementing targeted digital literacy programs, offer promising pathways to bridge these gaps. Therefore, sustained investment and policy intervention are required to ensure digital empowerment benefits all Somali women, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

The popularity of digital media among young Somali women has reshaped the women's agency and capabilities within a highly patriarchal and socially restrictive context. Drawing on the Capability Approach and the concept of digital media as technical objects, the analysis highlighted that digital platform such as TikTok, Instagram, and initiatives like Bilan Media and the Somali Digital Media Academy offer alternative spaces for learning, self-expression, income generation, and collective action. These platforms enhance young women's opportunities to overcome spatial,

social, and institutional barriers that traditionally limit their participation in education, the economy, and civic life.

However, digital tools' empowerment potential is not automatic. As the concept of adverse digital incorporation shows, women's inclusion in online spaces can reproduce exploitation, harassment, and unequal value extraction unless broader societal and structural constraints are addressed. Moreover, access remains stratified by geography—urban vs. rural—leaving many rural and marginalized women excluded from these digital benefits.

Ultimately, digital media holds transformative potential, but realizing this potential requires a holistic approach that goes beyond access and emphasizes the importance of digital literacy, socio-cultural shifts, and policy interventions. In Somalia, where young women's voices are often marginalized, these digital tools are not just channels of communication but instruments of resistance and transformation, enabling new forms of agency, visibility, and collective power.

Reference:

Bailur, S. and Masiero, S. (2017) 'Women's income generation through mobile internet: a study of focus group data from Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda', Gender, Technology and Development, 21(1-2), pp. 77-98. doi: 10.1080/09718524.2017.1385312.

Barrow, A. (2023) 'Media Academy in Somalia hopes to empower women through film', Voice of America. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/media-academy-in-somalia-hopes-to-empower-women-through-film/7198616.html (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

CMI (2020) Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions. Available at: https://www.cmi.no/publications/7277-excluding-women-the-clanization-of-somali-political-institutions (Accessed: 24 February 2025).

Easy Sociology (2024) The Feminist View of Power: An Outline, Explanation, and Analysis. Available at: https://easysociology.com/sociological-perspectives/feminism/the-feminist-view-of-power-an-outline-explanation-and-analysis/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Federal Government of Somalia, Ministry of Communications and Technology (2023) Development of an ICT Digital Inclusion Policy and Action Plan for Advancing Access to ICT Services for Marginalized Groups: Contextual Analysis Report.

Gibson, P. (2025) 'Economic empowerment: The digital economy unlocks opportunities for underserved communities', Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2025/01/08/economic-empowerment-the-digital-economy-unlocks-opportunities-for-underserved-communities/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Haenssgen, M. J. and Ariana, P. (2017) 'The place of technology in the Capability Approach', Oxford Development Studies, 46(1), pp. 98–112. doi: 10.1080/13600818.2017.1325456.

Haenssgen, M. J. and Ariana, P. (2018) 'The place of technology in the Capability Approach', Oxford Development Studies, 46(1), pp. 98–112. doi: 10.1080/13600818.2017.1325456.

Heeks, R. (2022) 'Digital inequality beyond the digital divide: conceptualizing adverse digital incorporation in the global South', Information Technology for Development, 28(4), pp. 688–704. doi: 10.1080/02681102.2022.2068492.

Hiiraan Online (2025) 'Somaliland police arrest officer seen slapping woman in viral video'. Available at: https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Mar/200566/somalilandpolicearrestofficerseenslappingwomaninviral_video.aspx (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2021) Somalia Upper House July - August 2021 Election Results. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SO/SO-UC01/election/SO-UC01-E20210727/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Interpeace (2023) Somalia: How women and youth can use social media to promote peace. Available at: https://www.interpeace.org/2023/11/somalia-how-women-and-youth-can-use-social-media-to-promote-peace/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2025) Capability Approach. Available at: https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/ (Accessed: 28 February 2025).

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (n.d.) Sen's Capability Approach. Available at: https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/ (Accessed: 26 April 2025).

Isse, S. (2022) 'Digital media and coffee shops are helping to nurture aspiring Somali singers', Global Voices. Available at: https://globalvoices.org/2022/02/25/digital-media-and-coffee-shops-are-helping-to-nurture-aspiring-somali-singers/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Kotikula, A. (2023) 'Gender Data on Somali Women's Digital Access'. Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasikiliza/gender-data-somali-womens-digital-access (Accessed: 25 April 2025).

Mackey, A. and Petrucka, P. (2021) 'Technology as the key to women's empowerment: a scoping review', BMC Women's Health, 21, 78. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-021-01225-4 (Accessed: [Insert Date Accessed]).

Mohamed, H. (2012) Somali Women and Traditional Institutions: Change, Community, and the Politics of Culture. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/39003208/SomaliWomenandTraditionalInstitutionsChangeCommunityandthePoliticsof_Culture (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Omer, M. (2021) 'Somalia Will Reserve 30% of Parliament Seats for Women in Upcoming Election'. Available at: https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/somalia-women-parliament-30-percent/ (Accessed: 25 April 2025).

Said, H. (2024) 'The rise of Somali social media: TikTok's role in change', Meer. Available at: https://www.meer.com/en/82112-the-rise-of-somali-social-media-tiktoks-role-in-change (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

Somalia National Bureau of Statistics (2022) Women and Men in Somalia. 2nd ed. Federal Government of Somalia.

TikTok Hashtags (2025) #dumarland. Available at: https://tiktokhashtags.com/hashtag/dumarland/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

TikTok Hashtags (2025) #naagnool. Available at: https://tiktokhashtags.com/hashtag/naagnool/ (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

UN Women (2024) Placing gender equality at the heart of the global digital compact: Summary. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/placing-gender-equality-at-the-heart-of-the-global-digital-compact-summary-en.pdf (Accessed: 24 February 2025).

UNDP (2023) Bridging the Gender Digital Divide: A Way Out of Crisis. Available at: https://www.undp.org/stories/bridging-gender-digital-divide-way-out-crisis (Accessed: 25 April 2025).

United Nations (2021) Realizing Women's 30 Per Cent Quota, Political Participation in Somalia 'a Game Changer' For Sustainable Peace, Deputy Secretary-General Tells Security Council. Available at: https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14648.doc.htm (Accessed: 25 April 2025).

United Nations Development Programme (2022) Somalia's first all-women media team puts women journalists in control of the news agenda. Available at: https://www.undp.org/somalia/press-releases/somalias-first-all-women-media-team-puts-women-journalists-control-news-agenda (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

United Nations Development Programme (2023) Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Available at: https://www.undp.org/somalia/our-focus/genderequality (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

United Nations Development Programme (2023) Somali Women's Media Project (SWoMP). Available at: https://www.undp.org/somalia/projects/somali-womens-media-project-swomp (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

United Nations Development Programme (2024) Somalia's Only All-Women Media Team Wins Global Freedom of Expression Award. Available at: https://www.undp.org/somalia/press-releases/somalias-only-all-women-media-team-wins-global-freedom-expression-award (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

United Nations Development Programme (2025) Somalia's First All-Women Media Team Shakes Somali Journalism. Available at: https://www.undp.org/somalia/stories/somalias-first-all-women-media-team-shakes-somali-journalism (Accessed: 27 April 2025).

World Bank (2023) Creating Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Opportunities for Women and Girls in Somalia. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/03/08/creating-science-technology-engineering-and-mathematics-stem-opportunities-for-women-and-girls-in-afe-somalia (Accessed: 25 April 2025).

Harper, M. (2025) 'Lyse Doucet masterclass caps 6 amazing months for Bilan', Bilan Media. Available at: https://www.bilan.media/blog/lyse-doucet-masterclass-caps-6-amazing-months-for-bilan (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

Abdullahi Mohamad, A. (2025) 'NCA hosts National Girls in ICT Day 2025 conference to empower young women in tech', Somali National News Agency. Available at: https://sonna.so/en/nca-hosts-national-girls-in-ict-day-2025-conference-to-empower-young-women-in-tech/ (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

McVeigh, K. (2024) 'Somali women face online hate speech and abuse on social media', The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/04/somali-women-online-social-media-online-hate-speech-abuse (Accessed: 30 April 2025)

One World Media (2023) 'Highlights from the 36th One World Media Awards Ceremony', One World Media. Available at: https://oneworldmedia.org.uk/latest/highlights-from-the-36th-one-world-media-awards-ceremony/ (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

TikTok user (n.d.) 'TikTok profile content' [TikTok]. Content viewed by author on 30 April 2025. Link withheld to preserve anonymity.