Gender Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and the Rule of Law in Africa

Introduction

Lawyers Hub, in partnership with UNESCO (HQ and East Africa office), hosted a webinar themed "Gender Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and the Rule of Law in Africa." on April 18 2024. The speakers were Teki Akuetteh, Neema Jaji, and Lilian Olivia Orero, the moderator was Jorge Andrés Clarke De la Cerda. This article outlines the key elements of the discussion, speakers' perspectives, and recommendations. As highlighted by Sharmaine Koh in the keynote presentation, this type of dialogue is necessary for the healthy development of legal and technological landscapes in Africa.

Key elements of the discussion;

- **Gender bias in AI and its impacts on the legal landscape:** AI perpetuates biases in decision-making, amplifying bias from historical legal documents, behaviors, and societal norms.
- **The Gender Gap:** Women are underrepresented in the legal and tech sectors, lacking funding and STEM training, hindering credibility, and facing gender stereotypes in these male-dominated sectors.
- **Role of Governments and International Organizations:** Influential institutions should foster environmental and structural changes around practices in the tech and legal sectors, especially about AI, like promoting inclusiveness STEM education for women, and funding AI and gender research.

Speakers perspective

- **Teki Akuetteh**

Teki addressed technological impact issues on the African population, especially women, such as algorithmic bias, access to technology (e.g., AI), education and training on technologies, job displacements, and the need for upskilling and reskilling the population. She also discussed legal impact issues like guaranteeing fundamental rights for the population, especially for the most vulnerable, innovation development, equitable opportunities, access to justice, conflict of laws, especially laws outside African jurisdiction, how to adequately protect African citizens, and the legal and regulatory challenges of AI in Africa. She stressed that the existing opportunities should be seized by implementing strategies comprising ethical and moral considerations, deliberate policies and mechanisms, harmonized frameworks, and education and training.

- **Lilian Olivia Orero**

Lilian discussed the importance of using a diverse range of data sources as a best practice for having diverse data sets, which contributes to reducing biases. She mentioned examples of African-developed technology to identify and mitigate gender bias. She also stressed the inquiry "What does AI mean in the African context?" and the role of governments and international organizations to contribute to its understanding. Finally, she highlighted the need for local research and education on AI and gender issues.

- **Neema Jaji**

Neema discussed the challenges women face in legal and tech sectors in Africa, such as not enough women in STEM disciplines, hence a lack of credibility, funding issues, work-life balance, the knowledge gap within the legal tech sector, and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. She pointed out examples of successful initiatives and programs to empower women in legal tech across Africa, like the African Gender Innovation Lab, some elements within the AU 2063 Agenda, and many individual initiatives. As recommendations, Neema highlighted the importance of creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in legal tech, equal access to opportunities, capacity building, and advocating for national and regional policies to implement the necessary structural changes for gender inclusivity and bias reduction. Finally, she underscored the inquiry: "Are we really willing to accommodate women within the legal and tech sectors and their intersections?

Recommendations

1. Structural changes at the national, regional, and continental level, considering robust and gender-sensitive policy frameworks to foster behavioral, cultural, and societal norms changes towards gender inclusiveness, reduce gender biases, and mitigate their consequences.
2. Advocate for equal access to resources, education (especially in STEM disciplines), capacity-building for women in legal tech, and research on AI and gender issues.
3. When addressing gender bias in AI algorithms, consider mitigating not only the technical bias related to the data and the technology itself, but also the implicit bias from designers, developers, and other humans participating in the technology development, as well as cultural and societal bias, taking into account diverse cultures, needs, perspectives, and experiences.
4. Aim for achieving gender inclusivity at least at three levels: technical, community, and user.
5. Keep fostering the development of dialogues like this webinar to raise awareness about AI bias issues and their consequences in the legal sector in Africa, and to elevate the discussion on the topic.

Moving Forward

To advance gender inclusiveness in the legal and tech sectors, and their intersections, in Africa, implementing structural changes at national, regional, and continental levels is crucial. These changes should focus on robust,

gender-sensitive policy frameworks that promote shifts in behavior, culture, and societal norms to reduce gender biases and their impacts. Ensuring equal access to resources and education, especially in STEM fields, is vital, along with capacity-building initiatives for women in legal tech and research on AI and gender issues.

Addressing gender bias in AI algorithms requires tackling not only the technical biases in data and technology but also the implicit biases from designers, developers, and others involved in technology development, as well as cultural and societal biases. This approach should consider diverse cultures, needs, perspectives, and experiences. Ultimately, achieving gender inclusiveness should be targeted at three levels: technical, community, and user, ensuring a comprehensive and integrated strategy for fostering gender equality in AI and beyond.

Finally, promoting continuous dialogues, such as this webinar, is crucial for increasing awareness of AI bias issues and their impacts on the legal sector in Africa, and for advancing the discussion on this topic.