

HOW CAN CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CONSUMERS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD?

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The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) is a broad coalition working to enable everyone, everywhere to access the life-changing power of the Internet

Web Foundation is an independent, international organisation fighting for digital equality – a world where everyone can access the web and use it to improve their lives



Sonia N. Jorge is an expert in the confluence of development and communications policy. She has over 25 years of diverse international experience in a career spanning both the private and not-for-profit sectors.

Her work has included ICT policy and regulatory advice and analysis, strategic industry planning, national ICT/broadband policy development, and the creation of new legal and regulatory frameworks to address issues around competition, cost-based pricing, spectrum management, and infrastructure development and sharing. Sonia is an avid advocate of gender equality in development, and has worked extensively to promote gender analysis and awareness in the ICT planning process, as well as an

understanding of the importance of universal access and digital inclusion for development.

She serves as a member and expert in a number of Committees, including the DFID's Digital Access Panel for Africa, the ITU-UN Women EQUALS Initiative, The World Economic Forum's Future of the Internet Initiative, the Broadband Commission Working Group on the Gender Digital Divide, and the Advisory Committee on International Communications and Information Policy (ACICIP) Subcommittee of the US State Department on ICT4D.

Having been a partner of Consumers International for some time now, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) and the Web foundation see our growing partnership as critical in the journey to ensure that **Digital Equality - a world where everyone has the same rights and opportunities online** - becomes a reality. We also believe that by putting people, and consumers in general, at the center of policy making processes, we are a step ahead in ensuring that policy focuses on securing consumer rights and opportunities in a digital ecosystem designed by and for the people.

Yet, as the digital revolution marches forward, billions are being left behind. This digital divide falls along gender and income lines – women and the poor comprise the majority of those offline today. These populations are often already marginalised offline and, as a result, arguably stand the most to benefit from the opportunities associated with online access; instead, they are now seeing these offline inequalities replicated online. While internet access has the power to upend this balance of power, today's digital exclusion is instead reinforcing existing patterns of privilege... and discrimination.

Consumers International's motto of 'Coming together for Change' speaks directly to A4AI and the Web Foundation's belief in the strength of multi-stakeholder coalition processes as the foundation for policy change. Collectively, we have a responsibility to advance the digital rights of citizens while remaining focused on policy change that advances affordable and equal access to all, specially to those traditionally marginalized, unconnected and unprotected as consumers.

I would like to suggest that we focus on women, since they particularly feel the impact of this digital divide. Over half of today's offline population are women – this means that more than 2 billion women globally are not connected, unable to access health, educational, and other resources and information available online.



Web Foundation research has found that women in poor, urban areas are up to 50% less likely to be online than men in the same communities and once online, women are 30-50% less likely than men to use the Internet to increase their income or participate in public life.

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So, I challenge Consumers International to mobilize, engage and support its members to come together for change by focusing on marginalized and unprotected consumers, with a special focus on women and the poor. Without efforts to enable opportunities for access and use that focus specifically on women and other offline populations, we risk entrenching current inequalities and contributing to a more unbalanced and unequal world.

At A4AI and the Web Foundation, we believe in the power of developing local solutions to local problems. For this reason, we aim to empower our local, country-based coalitions – which are composed of national stakeholders from private industry, the public sector, and civil society – to develop and advocate for the best solutions for overcoming these issues. Consumers International and its members must be part of these processes, and must support new ones to advocate for and advance consumer's rights in the digital age.

The fight for digital rights must continue – and perhaps becomes even more critical – once people are online. As more and more of our daily lives move online, we each leave a massive data trail in our wake. Most of us do not know what digital trails we are creating, who has collected them or what they will be used for. Companies rely on this data to personalise services and target ads that will be most relevant to users, but this collection of data can also lead to unintended consequences when we are profiled in ways that are detrimental to our interests, or when governments around the world take advantage of our digital trails to extend the state surveillance apparatus to unprecedented levels.

We the people, consumers of digital technology, have a right to know what is collected about us and what it will be

used for. And we have a right to transparent explanations of how our personal data is processed, sold, and used to make decisions for and about us. All of us — government and public sector policymakers, tech companies and service providers, activists and civil society — must come together to develop policy and regulatory frameworks that protect us online, and which put a fair level of control back into the hands of the people.

It is up to us to ensure that the digital revolution becomes a movement that empowers all. Failure to act means leaving billions behind; it means eroding consumer trust — a core foundation upon which the digital economy is built.

For us collectively, this means working not only to expand affordable access to everyone, everywhere, but also to ensure that the web remains truly open so that once people come online, they have the opportunity to access and use the information and tools needed to participate fully in civic life. Consumers International's leadership, engagement and partnership is critical to achieve these goals and I urge you to grow and strengthen your networks to reclaim consumer trust in the digital economy. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your members throughout the world to achieve Digital Equality!

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