



Photo: Ramundo Media for DAI

THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE PRIMER

*The advent of digital technology
presents both great opportunity and
great risk for closing the gender
digital divide between men and women*

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COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD are in the midst of a historic digital transition. As noted in the USAID Digital Strategy, the rapid development and adoption of digital technology is transforming industries, governments, economies, and societies. Digital ecosystems—the stakeholders, systems, and enabling environment that together empower people and communities to use digital technology to access services, engage with each other, or pursue economic opportunities—hold immense potential to help people live more free and prosperous lives.

At the same time, digital transformation comes with the risk of increasing inequality. Despite the global prevalence of mobile phones and the Internet, the reality in many communities does not yet reflect the potential of a digital ecosystem that drives sustainable and equitable growth, often excluding vulnerable and marginalized groups. The USAID Digital Strategy aims to strengthen open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems in each country where we work. Through the Digital Strategy, the Agency is further demonstrating its commitment to closing the gender digital divide, by building awareness and capacity of USAID staff, partners, and partner countries to overcome the barriers to women's access and meaningful use of digital technology. No country will be self-reliant if all members of its citizenry cannot benefit equally from the gains of a global digital ecosystem.

THE GSMA MOBILE GENDER GAP REPORT 2020

IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-
INCOME COUNTRIES

300
MILLION

**FEWER WOMEN
THAN MEN ACCESS THE
MOBILE INTERNET**

*and smartphone
ownership is*

20% LOWER

**FOR WOMEN
THAN MEN**

393
MILLION

**WOMEN
ARE STILL WITHOUT
MOBILE PHONES**

...the majority are in:

– SOUTH ASIA –

207 MILLION

– SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA –

74 MILLION

WHAT IS THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE?

The digital divide is the distinction between those who have Internet and/or mobile access and are able to make use of digital communications services, and those who are excluded from these services. The gender digital divide reflects the inequalities between men and women in terms of digital technology access and use.

While Internet adoption and mobile phone ownership are on the rise, figures show staggering gaps in access for women in many regions of the world. The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020 highlights that more than 300 million more men than women access the mobile Internet in low- and middle-income countries, and smartphone ownership, a principal way of accessing the Internet, is 20 percent lower for women than men. Of the reported 393 million women still without mobile phones, the majority of those are in South Asia (207 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (74 million).¹

As the world continues to move online, the cost of digital exclusion is increasing. Without a concerted effort, the social and economic consequences of the gender digital divide will continue to grow. Women will not be able to take advantage of the benefits of connectivity and online content, including digital development programming

HOW DO WOMEN BENEFIT FROM CLOSING THE DIVIDE?

Technology enables access to critical health services and opportunities for education, civic participation, employment, entrepreneurship, and access to financing that were once out of reach for many people. It acts as a vital gateway for women to access information that can improve their livelihoods and significantly enhances their ability to contribute to their families and the global community. Intel's Women and the Web report shows that doubling the number of women online in developing countries has the potential to increase global GDP by an estimated US \$13-18 billion. This would also dramatically expand opportunities for half a billion women and girls through improved ability to generate income and achieve higher education and greater freedom as a result of being online.² Yet, just as digital technology is accelerating opportunities and impact all across the world, women are being left behind.

The gender digital divide is grounded in global gender inequality. Thus, there is a negative feedback loop: "gender inequality informs unequal access to and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and the subsequent growth in ICT deepens gender inequality."³ Closing the gender digital divide requires addressing root causes of gender inequalities through both policies and technologies in the service of transforming larger gender inequalities. One of the primary reasons women bear such a disproportionate burden of poverty is their lack of access to information that could assist them in achieving their livelihood needs and development goals.



Photo: Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom for USAID

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recognizes that the gender digital divide significantly hampers the ability of digital technology to help women improve their lives, the stability of their families, and the resilience of their communities. Through the USAID Digital Strategy, the Agency is committed to sharing best practices learned in previous gender and ICT programs, including the Women's Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative's WomenConnect Challenge, and ensuring that USAID digital development addresses digital inequalities and mitigates potential risks or harms for women and girls entering the online space. USAID will also incorporate digital literacy and skills-building for women into all development programs that have a digital component.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO CLOSING THE DIVIDE?

Affordability

- Affordability is one of the principle drivers of digital inclusion. The Alliance for Affordable Internet estimates that 900 million people live in countries with Internet prices higher than the ITU's Internet affordability benchmark (1 GB mobile data for 2 percent or less of monthly income). In Africa, the average price of mobile Internet is three times higher than the affordability benchmark.⁴ If the costs of utilizing digital technology and services are too high, it becomes cost prohibitive for women to use them. This is particularly problematic to efforts to support women at the last-mile in low-resource communities as they often do not have the means to pay for devices, exorbitant fees, taxes, or pricing plans.

Availability

- While Internet coverage around the world is expanding, there is still a lack of infrastructure and access, including significant gaps in Internet coverage and adoption in poor and low-income areas. Africa has the lowest penetration of worldwide Internet use at 39 percent, and 15 countries, including Eritrea and Madagascar, have less than 10 percent of their population online.⁵ Many factors account for these gaps. Poor communications infrastructure such as fiber-optic cables, cell towers, satellites, data centers, software platforms, and end-user devices limit access. Underprivileged women are also less likely to have access to smartphones and many women have feature phones that do not support mobile Internet use. This can prevent women from accessing the more transformational uses inherent in these more sophisticated technologies.



Photo: GAL Group

Ability

- **Digital Literacy and Skills** Digital literacy includes both the skills to functionally use the Internet and digital technologies, as well as the knowledge of how to do so safely, securely, and with trusted information and data protection. The lack of digital literacy is a persistent barrier to adoption and use of technology in developing countries since there are gaps in the functional ability of certain groups to fully use these digital tools. This becomes particularly important for employment opportunities since over 90 percent of jobs worldwide have a digital component and, without these skills, women often do not have the confidence to participate in the digital workforce.⁶
- **Social Norms and Underlying Gender Inequality** In many countries, social and cultural norms dictate that women cannot or should not participate in the digital ecosystem. The Internet is often perceived as a risk to the traditional social order. For instance, hundreds of rural communities in northern India have banned women's mobile phone use, and other communities have made a variety of decrees declaring Internet use "immoral" for women. Challenging these norms and promoting positive perceptions of women's ICT use is essential to sustainably including these women in the digital ecosystem.

Appetite

- **Lack of Relevance** Many women who are meant to benefit from digital development programs see no reason to be online. These programs often do not take women's specific needs and concerns into account, and applications and mobile phones are given to those with specific roles in the population, such as a community health worker or agricultural extension agent. Localization of content and ease of use can also be barriers, as thousands of unwritten languages—some with a base of millions of speakers—are not represented in the digital form.
- **Safety, Security, and Harassment** There are safety and security risks associated with online and mobile access, and women and girls face a disproportionate amount of digital harm and harassment. This can include being exposed to possibly exploitative behavior, and, in environments that discourage women's use of digital technology, going online can pose a safety risk to women and girls breaking the traditional social order. Efforts to close the gender digital divide must take into consideration how to protect the safety and security of program beneficiaries.

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Photo: GAL Group

THROUGH THE DIGITAL STRATEGY, USAID commits to closing the gender digital divide with projects like the Women's Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative, a U.S. Government-wide effort to economically empower 50 million women in the developing world by 2025. The WomenConnect Challenge (WCC), a program operating under W-GDP, was launched by USAID in 2018 as a global call for solutions to improve women's participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the way women and girls access and use technology. Several grantees have been working on solutions that use technology to challenge social norms and thus create new norms that encourage women's ICT use.



WCC GRANTEE ADDRESSES NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN USING TECHNOLOGY

In northern Nigeria, fear of moral decline is frequently used as a justification for restricting women and girl's access to technology and the Internet. WCC grantee Equal Access International's (EAI) Tech4Families program combines media and community mobilization to convene families and Muslim clerics to combat negative norms and promote social and religious justifications for women's use of the Internet. Tech4Families designed a radio program that includes a drama segment, which explores a topic in a culturally appropriate way, and a discussion segment, which brings in locally respected experts and leaders to share their views. Weekly themes include common misperceptions and attitudes surrounding the Internet, moral and religious arguments for women's Internet use, and Internet safety and security. Additionally, Tech4Families has convened families to participate in Listening Discussions and Action Groups that meet to engage more deeply with the radio program content, critically reflect on the issues raised, and build their skills and knowledge of technology in a safe environment.

"I have recorded tremendous change from this program, and my family members who are part of this program have also benefited greatly from it. Before I attended this, I used to think that social media should not be allowed for women and children. I used to prevent my children from using social media, but now I have learned a lot and allowed my wife and children to use the Internet. I even give them my own handset to use to access the Internet. I would like to call on male parents on the need to allow their children to learn and use the Internet. They need to understand that it is a tool for knowledge acquisition. We need to allow children to advance their learning. We need to let our wives learn so that they can guide the children, as most men don't spend a lot of time at home."

– Father in the Tech4Families program

WCC GRANTEE ADDRESSES LACK OF CONNECTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE WITH FEMALE-LED COMMUNITY NETWORKS

WCC grantee AFCHIX is creating four female-led community networks (CNs) to bring Internet services to their home communities where network connectivity was either non-existent or too cost-prohibitive to be accessible. These community networks in Kenya, Namibia, Morocco, and Senegal are run by women's collectives that not only manage the technical aspects of the network, but work with regulators, create ICT training programs, and develop Internet-based enterprises. Local AFCHIX chapters have worked to train community network leaders and establish key partnerships with regulators, equipment suppliers, schools, and local governments in order to build community buy-in and set up the physical infrastructure for the networks. With women at the helm of last-mile connectivity solutions for their communities, they are serving as role models, creating new social norms, and demonstrating how empowering women through technology can benefit all.

HOW DO WE ADDRESS THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE?

The gender digital divide will not close by itself, but advancements in ICT have the potential to bridge the gap. Private companies are designing new hardware and software platforms for low-resource environments and are developing interfaces appropriate for illiterate and low-literacy populations and primarily oral languages. However, these advances must be accompanied by interventions that change attitudes about women's mobile and Internet access and create new social norms regarding gender and technology. To this end, it is important that the development community addresses these barriers to women's inclusion in their programming. USAID has identified five proven strategies to close the gender digital divide and increase women's economic empowerment.

Change Social Norms and Cultural Perceptions

In many poor or rural communities, access to technology and the internet by women is often seen as immoral, inappropriate, or unnecessary. It is important to work on perceptions with those frequently in power, such as men, community and religious leaders, and elders. Tackling these existing social and cultural norms will help women gain access to information and opportunities, build confidence, and feel empowered.

Create Economic Opportunities

When trained on using technology, women can access increased economic opportunities, from serving as community technology leaders to entrepreneurs. Once men are educated about online workforce opportunities for women, they often become supportive of technology

access due to the increased family income. In turn, a woman's financial gains allow her to have more liberty and be able to afford additional internet access, educating and empowering her further.

Cultivate Women's Confidence

In many developing countries, ingrained traditional gender roles lead women and men to believe that women are unable or not smart enough to use technology, enforcing a gender digital divide and lack of confidence. Targeted programs have helped women increase self-efficacy and have demonstrated that women are able to effectively utilize technology, understand risks and opportunities, and position themselves as role models in their communities.

Design Creative Women-Centric Technology

To close the gender digital divide, programs must use technology options tailored to women in developing countries, many of whom are illiterate or have low literacy levels. Innovative video and audio platforms allow women to readily communicate and learn. Offline content on a range of development topics can reach women who do not otherwise have access to the internet. Custom devices and services can meet women's needs much better than a "universal" technology.

Develop Community Support

As poor or rural women gain access to technology, many become advocates for change in their communities. When given a platform to communicate with local leaders, they have championed issues disproportionately affecting women such as gender-based violence and access to finance or government programs, which benefits the whole community and leads to greater acceptance of women's technology use.

In many ways, bridging the gender digital divide is a human problem, not a technical one. By putting women's needs at the center of meaningful connectivity, and designing programs with their information needs, aspirations, and barriers in mind, we can close the gender gap and develop a sustainable user base and female technical workforce, demonstrating the potential of technology to change lives and communities. Reaching the 1 billion women without access to the mobile Internet is a tall order and requires that countries, donors, technology partners, and policymakers make a concerted effort to apply these effective practices. ■



Photo: Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT)

A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

1. *Women's ownership, access, and use of ICT are different definitions: ownership necessitates that the mobile phone is registered in the woman's name. Access and use imply a larger pool, where women can utilize others' phones or community phones. Even if a mobile phone is registered to a woman, it does not mean that she is the primary user—as is the case when the government ties a mobile phone number to a person's larger national ID number, and the person wants to get a second mobile phone. Both mobile phone use and ownership are important statistics as they can, at times, serve as proxies for family and gender dynamics in the household.*
2. *Mobile Internet is the key statistic in measuring the gender digital divide. Mobile phone use includes all mobile phones, not just those that are Internet capable. Many users may have Internet-enabled phones but do not use mobile Internet services, or only use a subset. The gender digital divide has been made synonymous with Internet access; thus, there is a significant distinction between mobile phone ownership and mobile Internet usage.*

RESOURCES

Publications discussing the gender digital divide provide caveats that sex-disaggregated data in this domain is sparse and non-uniform, that sample populations are not necessarily representative of the country at large, and that concepts like “digital skills” are defined differently across studies.

Thus, it is important to take these studies as an aggregate and monitor indicator changes over time and geography to best approximate national gender digital divide data, and to identify both the data sources and data collection methodology of publications. While there are some discrepancies in data and projections between studies, there are more similarities than differences (Table 1).

TABLE 1: KEY PUBLICATIONS

<u>ITU. <i>The State of Broadband: Broadband as a Foundation for Sustainable Development</i> September 2019</u>	ITU's report uses the concept of meaningful universal connectivity to look at the benefits and potential downsides of digital connectivity. It reflects on the policies and recommendations that have made an impact in reaching the 51 percent adoption threshold and how to address the needs of the next 49 percent.
<u>GSMA. <i>Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020</i></u>	GSMA's report looks at how women's mobile access and use are changing and how efforts to reach women with technology need to evolve in turn. The report also provides updated figures on gender gaps in mobile ownership and mobile Internet use in LMICs.
<u>EQUALS Research Group. <i>Taking stock: Data and evidence on gender equality in digital access, skills, and leadership</i></u>	The EQUALS Research Group report surveys the landscape of knowledge on gender equality as it relates to access, skills, and leadership. The report also looks at the definitional and methodological challenges of measuring the gender digital divide.
<u>OECD. <i>Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Include, Upskill, Innovate</i></u>	OECD's report explores a range of factors that underpin the digital gender divide, bolsters the evidence base for policymaking and provides policy directions for consideration by all G20 governments.
<u>World Bank. <i>Engendering ICT Toolkit (2018)</i></u>	The World Bank's Toolkit highlights the barriers women face in owning, accessing, and benefitting from digital sector interventions implemented by the World Bank and identifies opportunities for using ICT to empower women.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Women's Economic Empowerment

1. GEM. GEM 2018/2019 Women's Entrepreneurship Report
2. ICRW. Innovation for Women's Empowerment
3. IMF. Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment
4. United Nations Foundation. Women's Economic Empowerment Roadmap
5. WEF. Global Gender Gap Report 2020

Women's Agency and Social Norms

1. ODI. How do gender norms change?
2. ODI. The norms factor: recent research on gender, social norms and women's economic empowerment
3. SEEP. Shifting Social Norms in the Economy for Women's Economic Empowerment
4. UNILEVER. Opportunities for Women: Challenging harmful social norms and gender stereotypes to unlock women's potential
5. World Bank. On Norms and Agency

Other Gender Digital Divide Resources

1. EQUALS Access Coalition. 10 Lessons Learnt: Closing the Gender Gap in Internet Access and Use
2. EQUALS. Gender Digital Inclusion Map
3. Girl Effect and Vodafone Foundation
4. GSMA. Mobile Technical Literacy Toolkit
5. USAID. Gender and ICT Survey Toolkit
6. ICRW. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: What is it, and how do we measure it?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rowentree, Oliver, and Mathew Shanahan, "Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020," GSMA, 2020, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>
- 2 Intel, "Enriching the Learning Experience," accessed June 2020, <https://www.intel.com/content/www/us/en/technology-in-education/women-in-the-web.html>
- 3 Human Rights Centre, "Ways to Bridge the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective," University of Essex, n/d, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/GenderDigital/HRBDT_submission.pdf
- 4 Web Foundation, "2019 Affordability Report: Lack of competition in broadband markets keeping millions offline," October 2019, World Wide Web Foundation, <https://webfoundation.org/2019/10/2019-affordability-report-lack-of-competition-in-broadband-markets-keeping-millions-offline/>
- 5 Internet World Stats, "Internet Users Statistics for Africa," accessed June 2020, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/statsI.htm>
- 6 Plan International, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide," accessed June 2020, <https://plan-international.org/education/bridging-the-digital-divide>



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