



CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE



THE PROBLEM

Despite increased smartphone penetration across the country, Kenyan women are still 27 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone. Through its partnership with the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, M-KOPA—an African fintech platform that provides digital financial services to underbanked consumers—is working to bridge this gender digital divide by increasing Kenyan women’s access to affordable smartphones, advancing women’s economic opportunities, and fostering more inclusive Internet connectivity.



THE PROJECT

In 2019, M-KOPA expanded its product offering to include Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) smartphones, and commercially scaled this business model in 2020 to bring affordable smartphone ownership to East and West African markets. With only an initial deposit, valid ID, and flexible digital micropayments of as little as \$0.30 per day, customers can immediately have access to a high-quality smartphone, thereby building ownership and credit history over time. M-KOPA smartphones have impacted over 1 million customers so far, with three in four clients connecting to 4G Internet for the first time, and gaining newfound access to online learning, income-earning opportunities, and healthcare services. After scaling the PAYG smartphone in Kenya, followed by Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana, M-KOPA’s team noticed a gender divide in its customer base, with men comprising the majority of its smartphone customers, demonstrating a divide which is mirrored in M-KOPA’s wider markets in Africa.

As a social impact-focused company, bridging this gender digital divide is important to M-KOPA. The company set out to intentionally strengthen its engagement with women customers as part of M-KOPA’s mission to serve underbanked (and often overlooked) consumers— particularly women—with life-enhancing products and services. To address the social and economic constraints that often prevent women from purchasing one of its smartphones, M-KOPA partnered with USAID and Microsoft Airband to (1) accelerate smartphone adoption by women, (2) hire and train more female sales agents, and (3) incentivize sales to women customers.

Under this partnership, M-KOPA researched and piloted solutions to improve its engagement with women agents and customers, including developing and testing direct-to-women sales channels and strategies.

One such solution is M-KOPA’s “Kuza Chama” initiative. The M-KOPA team in Kenya engaged chamas, or community saving groups, to connect directly with women and increase smartphone sales to them. M-KOPA selected chamas in all of Kenya’s regions with predominantly female membership and began attending chama meetings to provide training on tailored product offerings. This “Kuza Chama” Initiative seeks to:



- Encourage more women to purchase smartphones and adopt mobile Internet, by **raising awareness of the benefits** it can provide to their lives and family
- Provide basic **digital skills training**
- Catalyze the use of smartphones to **boost women’s incomes** through business activities

A second area of focus under the project was empowering M-KOPA's female sales agents by improving the recruitment, training, and field support provided to them. The M-KOPA team hypothesized that women customers might be more comfortable interacting with female sales agents and that providing female agents with additional training in sales and marketing might improve their effectiveness at sales and overall job performance. M-KOPA sought to:



- Recruit more female sales agents
- Provide skills training to female sales agents to improve sales outcomes and achieve higher monthly incomes
- Provide sales support to female agents through training and skills building

M-KOPA sales agents of all genders reported that selling M-KOPA products to women customers was often more challenging than selling to male customers due to certain socio-cultural norms that can sometimes restrict women's financial and technological decision-making. To work directly with its sales agents to start breaking down these barriers, M-KOPA launched its #BreakThe Bias month-long campaign in March 2022, aligned with International Women's Day on March 8th. The campaign objectives were to:



- Test a solution for bridging the gender gap by designing a new sales agent' commissions model for smartphone sales made to women
- Provide training and financial incentive for prioritizing women as smartphone customers

To improve the capacity of female sales agents, M-KOPA identified the need to improve its sales training and provide professional upskilling. As a solution, M-KOPA launched the "M-KOPA Academy," a digital learning management system that agents can access via their smartphone. Through M-KOPA Academy, the sales agents receive interactive training on different modules to improve their sales skills, product knowledge, job experience, and overall professional development. One of these modules trains all agents on how to better engage with women customers and increase sales made to women. The module focuses on how to adapt their sales approach to women customers, how to better understand the needs of women compared to men, and how smartphones and Internet connectivity can benefit women in all areas of their lives.

Lastly, M-KOPA piloted and scaled up a stationary kiosk sales model—a change from M-KOPA's usual model where sales agents work individually without a fixed point of sale. This solution was developed after learning that half of female agents leave their job or face restrictions due to gender-based reasons, including safety concerns on the job, and time and cost constraints due to competing household priorities.

Through the stationary kiosk, female agents are provided with a branded kiosk/tent stationed at a central point in town from where they can sell. Internal research following this pilot showed significant positive impact: the agents at the kiosks felt significantly safer while performing their job, spent less time and money doing their job, and made more sales, including more sales to women.

THE RESULTS

Together, these efforts provided essential capacity-building and income for M-KOPA's female sales agents, and contributed to research on effective solutions for bridging the gender digital divide in partnerships with private sector organizations.

M-KOPA's internal research shows that 55 percent of new women customers acquired through Kuza Chama during this grant period are first-time smartphone owners. Female sales agents also comprise 57 percent of new



sales agent recruits—a marked shift toward more gender parity in M-KOPA’s team of sales agents. Additional external impact research conducted showed:



- 86 percent of new women customers report that M-KOPA smartphone ownership has positively **improved their lives**.
- More than half of women customers mention that their **employment opportunities have increased** because of the M-KOPA phone.
- 4 in 5 women customers who use M-KOPA’s smartphone for business saw an **improvement in their income** because of using the phone.
- 95 percent of women sales agents say that the M-KOPA Academy trainings were **very important for their skills and confidence**, and two-thirds mentioned their earnings increased significantly because of it.
- 4 in 5 sales agents say that the sales support initiatives piloted under this project have **increased their women customer base**.
- 97 percent of sales agents say the sales support initiatives have **increased their happiness** in their job.

M-KOPA’s work advances the overarching goal of the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative to bring meaningful connectivity to more women around the world. To learn more about the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, [click here](#).



Figures between May 2021 and Dec 2022