Photo: Narendra Shrestha

USAID DIGITAL LITERACY SECTORAL BRIEFS

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Digital Literacy,[1] Gender Equality, and Women's Empowerment

Women and girls in all their diversity are increasingly using digital tools to enhance their earning potential, education, health practices, household management, and political participation. However, the gender digital divide (GDD) remains one of the most pressing issues in digital development: across all social and economic groups, women have less access to digital technology and use it at lower rates than men. Women with overlapping intersectional identities—like class, race, ethnic or religious minority, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability status—are especially at risk. Without the necessary digital knowledge and skills, women risk being left behind by the digital transformation. This inhibits their participation in society and in public life, hindering USAID's goal of uplifting the rights of women and girls around the world.
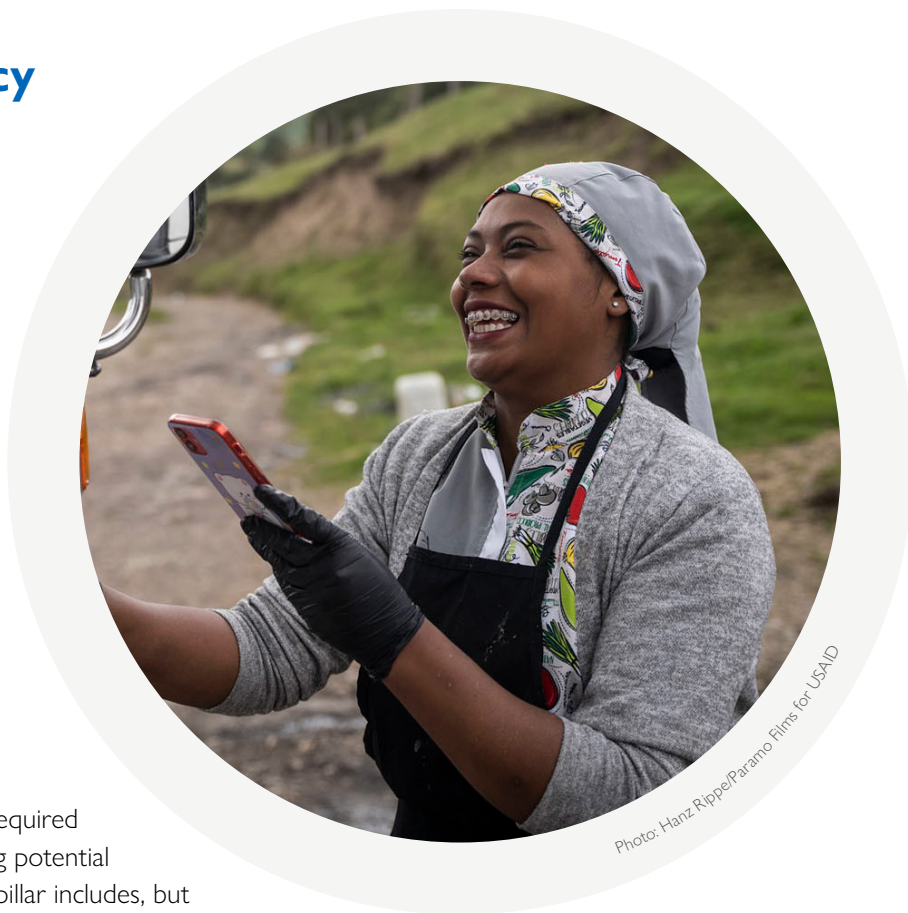
What is Digital Literacy?

USAID—building on UNESCO's definition of the term—defines digital literacy as "*The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.*"

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1   Unless otherwise cited, all information in this sectoral brief comes from USAID's Digital Literacy Primer. Full citation: "Digital Literacy Primer: How to Build Digital Literacy into USAID Programming" (USAID, 2022), https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/digital-literacy-primer.

USAID's Digital Literacy Framework

To effectively and equitably achieve digital access, USAID's approach to digital programming must extend beyond infrastructure and devices to ensure that users possess a nuanced set of skills to meaningfully, responsibly, and safely participate in digital ecosystems. Two pillars underpin USAID's definition of digital literacy: capacity and safety.

» **Capacity** refers to the technical knowledge and skills required to use digital devices and services such as mobile phones; tablets and computers; the Internet; messaging and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook; and audio and visual tools.

» **Safety** refers to the skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully. This pillar includes, but is not limited to, strategies for strengthening cyber hygiene[2] and countering mis- and disinformation.

Photo: Hanz Rippe/Paramo Films for USAID

As explained in the Digital Literacy Primer, USAID takes two primary approaches for incorporating digital literacy into program design:

» **Foundational** digital literacy activities build digital literacy skills applicable to all aspects of users' economic, social, and personal lives—a goal in and of itself.

» **Tactical** digital literacy activities prepare target populations to use digital tools to ensure that a digital intervention is effective in a particular sector (this category may also include activities that do not have digital literacy as their singular goal).

What is technology-facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV)?

TFGBV is defined as any threat or action carried out using the internet and/or information and communication technology that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or perceived sexual or gender identity, or by enforcing harmful gender norms (Hinson et al. 2018). Examples of TFGBV include doxing (the public release of individuals' private contact information or addresses); image-based abuse; and online harassment, hate speech, or the digital spread of gendered mis- or disinformation. TFGBV has comparable and, in some cases, outsized impacts as other forms of gender-based violence, as the use of technology enables perpetrators to easily commit these acts of violence across borders, with anonymity and impunity.

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2   Cyber hygiene is defined as the practices and steps that users of computers and other devices take to maintain system health and improve online security. These practices are often part of a routine to ensure the safety of identity and other details that could be stolen or corrupted.

Photo: USAID

Five strategies to close the Gender Digital Divide (GDD)

USAID's WomenConnect Challenge has identified the following proven strategies to close the GDD and improve women's digital literacy:

1. **Promote positive social norms and cultural perceptions**, particularly around women accessing the Internet and digital tools.

2. **Create economic opportunities** for women trained on—and receiving training on—digital tools.

3. **Cultivate women's confidence** around the Internet and information and communications technology (ICT) use.

4. **Design creative women-centric technology** options to reach women who may not otherwise have Internet access.

5. **Develop community support** by giving women virtual platforms through which they can collaborate with local leaders on community initiatives, including those to combat TFGBV.

Digital Literacy in USAID's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Portfolio

All USAID activities aim to increase women's participation in social, economic, and political life, especially women with intersectional identities. Digital literacy activities that target women and girls are integrated into a wide range of USAID activities across technical areas. USAID is leveraging changing attitudes toward women's use of digital tools to introduce digital financial services, agriculture technology, and other digitally enabled solutions specific to women's personal and economic needs. For example, through the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, a renewable energy deployment company called New Sun Road is deploying a digital literacy program—predominantly in local languages—to close the gender digital divide and increase digital opportunities for indigenous women in rural Guatemala.

In addition to its tactical digital literacy efforts, in which USAID integrates digital literacy in other programming areas, the Agency also manages several foundational activities and programs focused on increasing women's digital tool usage and improving digital literacy. These activities can tackle obstacles like social norms, low confidence, and the risk of experiencing TFGBV across geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. They may also address ecosystem-wide challenges that affect women differently than men, such as limited connectivity and unaffordable devices and airtime. For example, USAID's Women Connect Challenge provides grants to companies or organizations in partner countries with high-potential solutions to "improve women's participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the ways women access and use technology." One Challenge grantee, the tech platform Viamo, now uses interactive voice response (IVR) technology to offer free 90-second audio digital literacy lessons to women in Tanzania and Pakistan who dial "3-2-1" on their mobile phones. These "edutainment"-style lessons which are offered in the target audiences' native languages, cultivate their confidence in using technology and digital tools.

Key Considerations

» **Develop more targeted interventions for women** (including women and girls with intersectional identities) by conducting interviews or surveys to appropriately segment them into audiences based on their digital literacy rates and relationships with digital technology. For each target audience of women:

– Engage them in developing the content of digital literacy activities so that these activities accurately reflect their needs and align with user-centered design principles.

– Use archetypes that mirror their different life stages and needs in program materials, especially for women whose intersectional identities affect their life experiences.

- o Reflecting the wide range of women's lives in program materials helps build a sense of confidence and identity and encourages digital tool use among those target populations of women.
  - Identify the most appropriate device for training activities; if a training or digital intervention is delivered on a device that most women trainees cannot access or cannot afford, they cannot apply their new knowledge in their everyday lives. This is especially important for women from marginalized groups, who may have even less access to technology.
  - Use audiovisual-enhanced content (e.g., IVR or text-to-speech) to reach women with low levels of numeracy and literacy.

» **Offer tactical digital literacy activities tied to other development goals, like employment.** Training women to develop digital competencies without a pathway to apply foundational digital literacy skills can lead to low skill retention and discourage trainees. Therefore, linking digital literacy activities to existing economic or entrepreneurship opportunities (tactical digital literacy) will incentivize women to achieve new digital proficiencies.

» **Design hands-on—not theoretical—trainings and digital literacy interventions.** To provide women with adequate support in adopting new digital tools or devices, it is critical to allow them opportunities to =practice using the tools during the training or intervention and ask questions to trainers. When designing these sessions, take into consideration the power dynamics that affect how comfortable women—especially marginalized women, like trans women—may feel when openly engaging with the trainers.

» **Address digital harm and online safety.** Consider the unique risks faced by girls and women—especially those with intersectional identities—in online spaces. Build on existing materials and resources to develop training activities that mitigate online safety risks, like online harassment and TFGBV, that affect women.

» **Map local laws, policies, and regulations that may be relevant to TFGBV to inform and contextualize TFGBV programming**, including but not limited to cybersecurity, digital privacy, consumer protection, and legal and regulatory frameworks around sexual violence or domestic violence.

USAID/Cambodia's Development Innovations (DI) Project

The USAID/Cambodia DI Project created a digital ambassador called Rachana—modeled on an archetype of 13-year-old Cambodian girl—to promote local girls' participation in the Technovation Cambodia coding competition and to encourage them to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers. Rachana eventually appeared in DI videos, a comic book series, and even a hologram at DI-sponsored events.
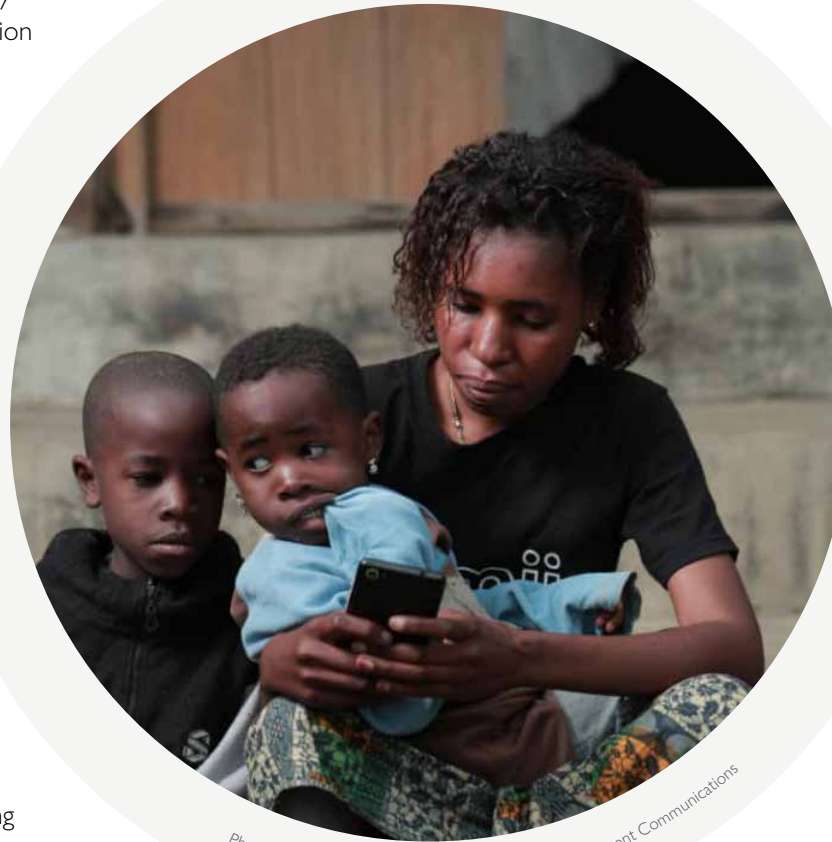

Photo: Riaz Jahanpour/USAID Tanzania/Digital Development Communications

» **Engage other community members to promote digital literacy among women:**

  – Target men and boys with capacity-building and sensitization in an effort to change social norms and shift their mindsets around women's use of digital tools.

  – To build local trust and confidence, involve community role models, leaders, and other gatekeepers in digital literacy activities.

» **Consider cultural contexts and norms when designing digital literacy interventions.** For example:

  – Consider if the activity's length and scheduled time interferes with women's other daily responsibilities (e.g., childcare, work outside the home, household tasks, and other necessary activities);

  – Identify any travel needs for this activity; and

  – Account for any need of community members such as elderly, fathers, husbands, brothers or others to support the engagement of women in planned interventions.

Other Resources

The gender digital divide (GDD): USAID's Gender Digital Divide Primer, Gender Digital Divide Toolkit (including the GDD Desk Review, Gender Analysis Technical Resource, and GDD Risk Mitigation Technical Note), Civicspace.tech's Digital Gender Divide resources, GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022, USAID's Gender and ICT Survey Toolkit, Pollicy.org's Inclusion: Not Just An Add-On, and Digital Frontiers' WomenConnect Challenge Proven Strategies

Digital safety: Safe Sisters, Take Back the Tech, and the Gendersec Curricula

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV): ICRW's Defining and Measuring TFGBV, NORC and ICRW's Landscape Analysis of TFGBV: Findings from the Asia Region, and UNFPA's TFGBV: Making All Spaces Safe

Safeguarding: Girl Effect's Girl Safeguarding Policy: Digital Privacy, Security, Safety Principles and Guidelines, Girl Effect's Digital Safeguarding Tips and Guidance, and Safe Sisters' Common Sense Guide to Digital Safety for Women and Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa

For more information, please contact digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.

USAID'S DIGITAL STRATEGY
USAID's Digital Strategy was launched in April 2020 with the goal of supporting USAID partner countries through their digital transformations. It aims to improve measurable development and humanitarian assistance outcomes through the responsible use of digital technology and to strengthen the openness, inclusiveness, and security of partner country digital ecosystems.