

UNDERSTANDING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Photo: KC Nwakalor for USAID / Digital Development Communications



WHAT IS THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE?

For low- and middle-income populations, access to ICT and inclusion in the digital economy provide great benefits and offer great potential. These benefits include financial inclusion; employment opportunities; improved access to healthcare, education, and agricultural services; improved productivity; increased safety and security; and increased access to information. Digital platforms can act as a major channel for delivering life-enhancing valued-added services. They can also help expand women's and girls' world views and sense of self in the world and increase their awareness of rights and opportunities locally and globally.

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; vulnerable or marginalized groups are often excluded, resulting in a digital divide.

The digital divide is the distinction between those who have mobile and internet access and are able to make use of ICT, and those who are excluded. The gender digital divide reflects the inequalities between men and women in terms of ICT access and use, although women's ownership, access, and use of ICT are also 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.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE?

More than half of the world's women are offline: in developing countries, the Internet penetration rate for women on all devices is 40.7 percent, compared to 52.8 percent for men, as shown in Figure 1.¹

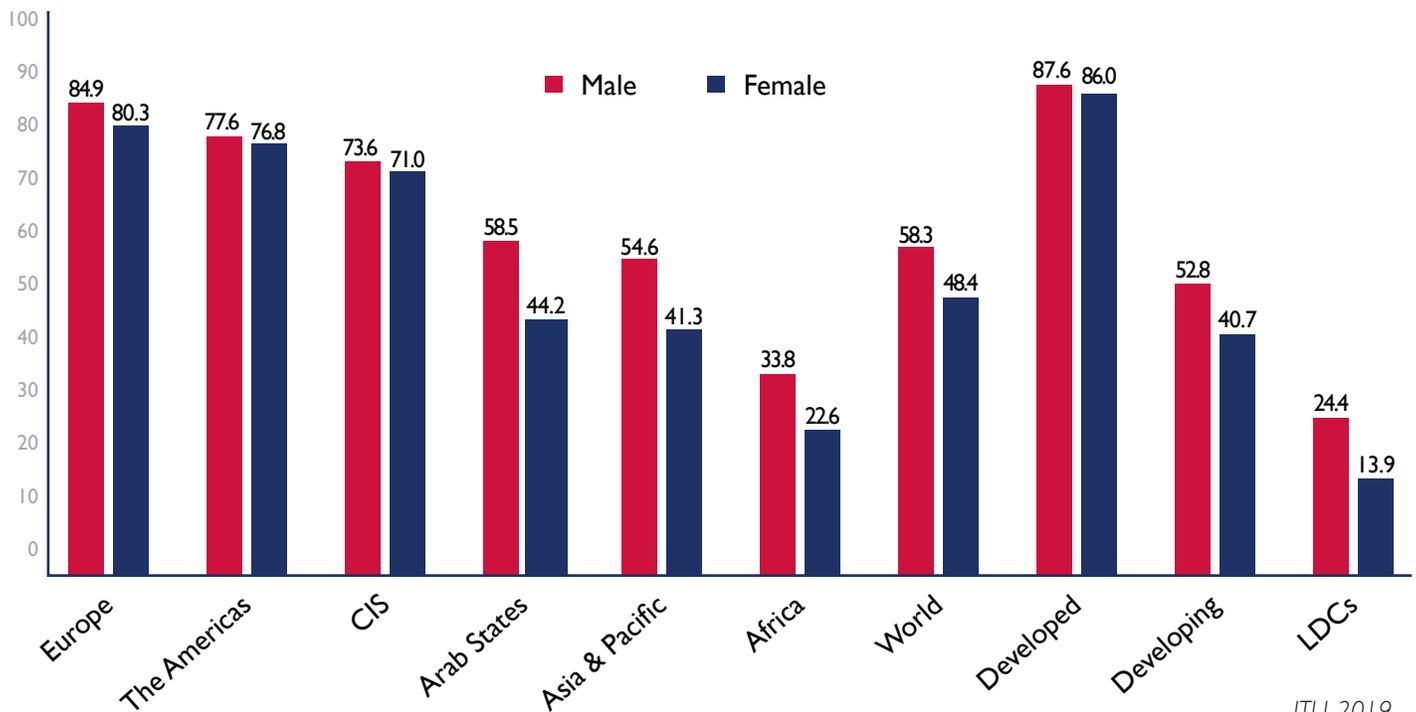
300 million fewer women than men in low-and middle-income countries use mobile Internet (a gender gap of 20 percent), as shown in Figure 2.²

Around 393 million adult women (aged 18 and over) in low- and middle-income countries do not own mobile phones; women are 8 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than men, as shown in Figure 3. This gap is larger in certain regions: in South Asia, the gender gap is 23 percent (207 million women); in sub-Saharan Africa, the gender gap is 13 percent (74 million).

Women are 20 percent less likely than men to own a smartphone; again, this gap is larger in certain regions.

300 MILLION
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FIGURE 1. INTERNET PENETRATION RATE FOR MEN AND WOMEN, 2019



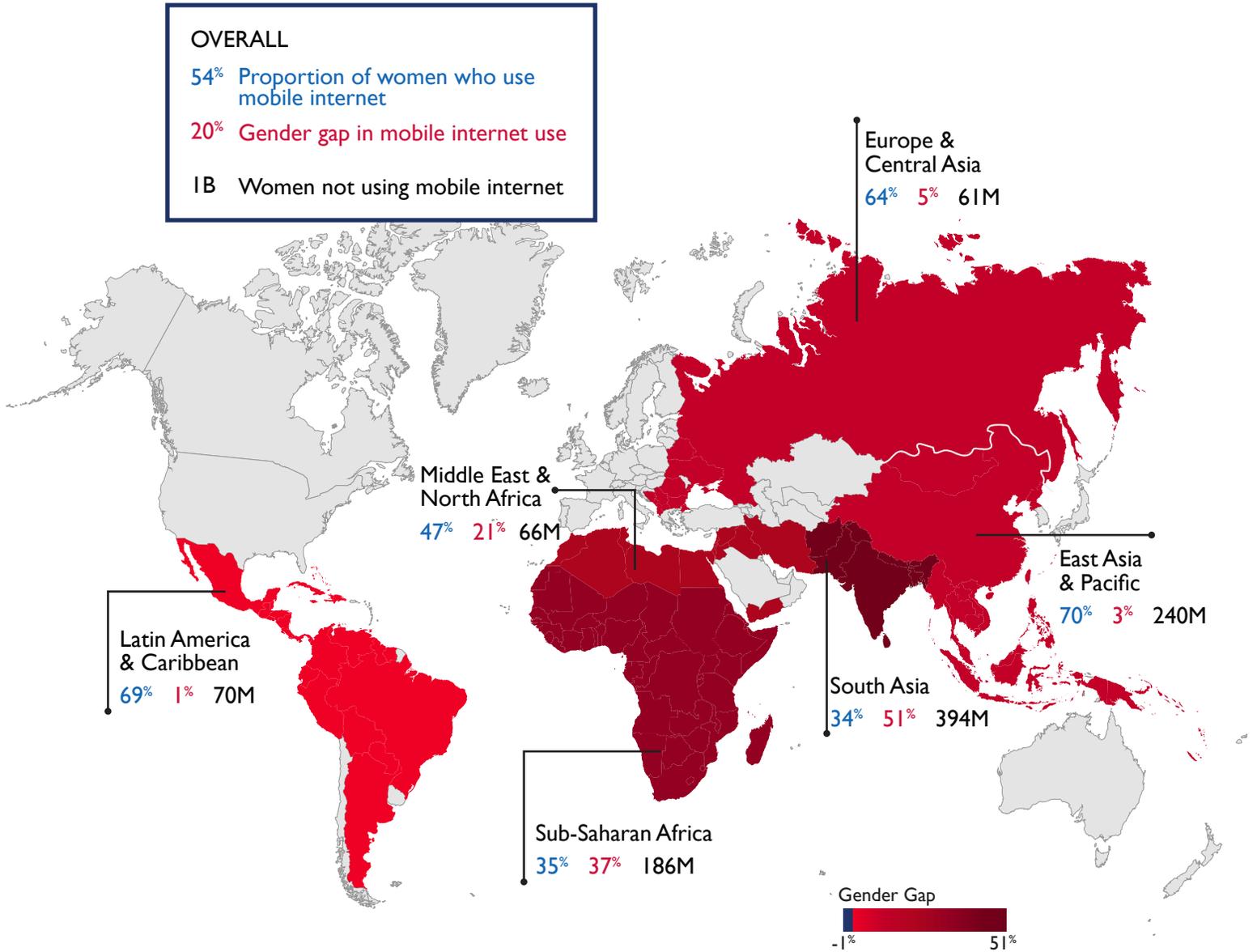
ITU, 2019

¹ Facts and Figures 2019. ITU, 2019. Available at itu.foleon.com/itu/measuring-digital-development/gender-gap/

² The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. GSMA Connected Women, 2020. Available at www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf

FIGURE 2. GENDER GAP IN MOBILE INTERNET USE IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES, BY REGION

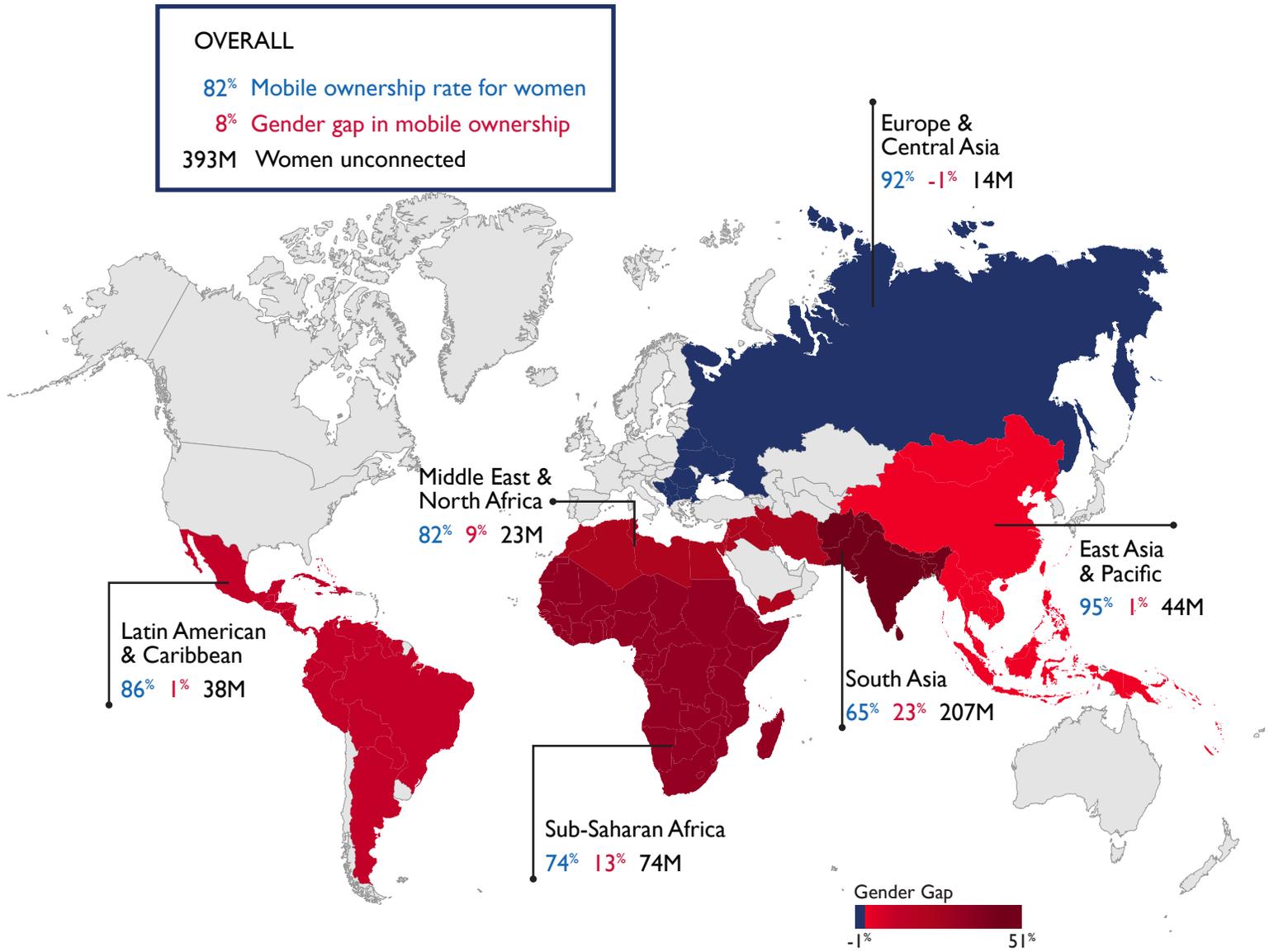
Base: Total adult population



GSMA Connected Women, 2020

FIGURE 3. GENDER GAP IN MOBILE OWNERSHIP IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES, BY REGION

Base: Total adult population



GSMA Connected Women, 2020

BOX I. A NOTE ON INTERSECTIONALITY

Both the Internet and the mobile gender digital divide are intersectional: a rural, low-income woman is much less likely to be connected than an urban woman. For example, while urban women in Brazil are 2 percent less likely than men to use the mobile Internet, women in rural areas are 32 percent less likely.⁴

However, research has tended to focus on divides based on singular identities, such as gender or class.⁵ There is a strong need to generate more research on cross-cutting divides.

There is a growing and persistent gap in women's meaningful use of mobile. Women tend to use mobiles (and mobile Internet) differently, and often less frequently, than men: they tend to use a smaller range of mobile services than men, use mobile services (other than voice) less frequently and less intensively than men, and own less expensive and sophisticated handsets. Efforts are growing to measure meaningful access and use in a systematic manner—for example, the Alliance for Affordable Internet's Meaningful Connectivity Standard.³

There is little data on the gender gap for girls under the age of 18, but available data shows similar patterns of access and use as for adult women.

WHY DOES THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE EXIST?

The key reasons for women's and girls' limited access to, and use of, mobile and the Internet are inter-related and complex and frequently rooted in social issues, but are grounded in global gender inequality, which is reflected in women's limited ICT access and use. The main barriers can be categorized into four broad areas.

AFFORDABILITY

» *ADS 205 Domain: Access and Control*

Affordability is one of the principle drivers of digital inclusion, and it is a key barrier to women's access and use. This is most apparent for women from rural areas and those from lower income groups.⁶ Because of social norms, women are often less financially independent than men and have lower levels of income (women often earn 30–50 percent less than men).⁷ Since women are therefore more price-sensitive than men, they tend to have less sophisticated devices and poorer user experiences.⁸ They also have less disposable income to spend on mobile or Internet services. If the costs of utilizing digital ICT and services are too high, it becomes cost-prohibitive for women to use them. This is particularly problematic for efforts to support women and girls in low-resource communities, as they often do not have the means to pay for devices and high fees, taxes, or pricing plans.

³ Meaningful Connectivity. Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2020. Available at a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity/

⁴ The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019. GSMA Connected Women, 2019. Available at gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019/

⁵ Leaving no one behind in a digital world. Institute of Development Studies, 2018. Available at opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14147/Emerging%20Issues_LNOBDW_final.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

⁶ The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. GSMA Connected Women, 2020. Available at www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf

⁷ Affordability Report 2015-16. Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2015. Available at a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2015/

⁸ Women's rights online digital gender gap audit. The Web Foundation, 2016. Available at: webfoundation.org/about/research/digital-gender-gap-audit/

AVAILABILITY: LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESS

» *ADS 205 Domain: Access and Control*

Low levels of network quality and coverage create additional barriers for women and girls. Women's choice of network is often restricted by various factors: having more basic handsets (women are less likely to have smartphones and more likely to have feature phones that do not support mobile Internet use); cost of data; and fewer choices of SIM—factors that are in turn determined by social norms and underlying gender inequalities. Women who live in poor and remote areas are especially affected, as there are 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; 15 African countries, including Eritrea and Madagascar, have less than 10 percent of their population online.⁹

ABILITY: USER CAPABILITY AND DESIGN

» *ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use*

Women's use of mobile and Internet platforms is often limited by their lower levels of technical and digital literacy skills, as well as by their lack of confidence in using ICT and the lack of relevant content for women's needs, including in local languages. Again, this follows broader social patterns of deep social exclusion of women and girls.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND SKILLS (*ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control*) This is rapidly emerging as one of the biggest barriers facing women, especially in online access. Digital literacy includes not only the skills to functionally be able to use the Internet and digital technologies, but also the knowledge of how to do so safely, securely, and with trusted information and protected data. The lack of digital literacy is a persistent barrier to adoption and use of ICT in developing countries, since there are gaps in the functional ability of certain groups to fully use these digital tools. In many countries, gendered inequalities mean that more women than men are illiterate or have lower levels of education, and as a result, women often lack the digital skills or confidence needed to use the Internet. If they do achieve Internet access, they may therefore have restricted use, accessing only a limited number of services and applications.¹⁰ More women than men report difficulties in using ICT and trouble reading content or language, and more women than men report needing more help from others in using more complex features.¹¹ Poorly designed handsets, and content not in the local language, present more of a barrier for women than for men. This digital literacy barrier becomes particularly important for employment opportunities, since over 90 percent of jobs worldwide have a digital component and, without these skills, women are often not able to participate in the digital workforce.¹²



Photo: USAID/Naomi Logan

⁹ Internet user stats for Africa. Internet World Stats, 2020. Available at www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

¹⁰ Mobile phones, Internet, and gender in Myanmar. GSMA and LIRNEAsia, 2015. Available at www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-phones-internet-and-gender-in-myanmar/

¹¹ Bridging the digital gender divide. OECD, 2018. Available at www.oecd.org/going-digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf?mc_cid=9cbd34bb84&mc_eid=86778a9e72

¹² Bridging the gender digital divide. Plan, 2020. Available at plan-international.org/education/bridging-the-digital-divide

EDUCATION (ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use) Gendered barriers to women’s participation are symptoms of an underlying wider gender inequality, and the link between lower levels of income and education and the gender digital divide is becoming well documented.¹³ In other words, inequitable access to education for girls, resulting in lower levels of employment and income, ultimately contributes to the gender digital divide overall.¹⁴ The Web Foundation’s study of women across nine low-income countries in Africa and Asia found that women who have some secondary education or who have completed secondary school are six times more likely to be online than women with only primary education or less, suggesting that education is a major enabler of digital empowerment among women.¹⁵

SOCIAL NORMS AND UNDERLYING GENDER INEQUALITY (ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use; Patterns of Power and Decision-Making) Mobile and Internet access and use follow broader social patterns, echoing the deep social and cultural exclusion of women; that is, women are disadvantaged in their access and use of ICT because of underlying social conditions. In fact, when women have the same opportunities and access to mobile and the Internet as men, they may become more frequent and active users.¹⁶ 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 set a variety of decrees declaring Internet use “immoral” for women. Challenging these norms and promoting positive perceptions of women’s ICT use will be essential to sustainably including these women in the digital ecosystem.

Inequitable access to education for girls, resulting in lower levels of employment and income, ultimately contributes to the gender digital divide overall.



¹³ Recommendations for Action: Bridging the gender gap in internet and broadband access and use. Broadband Commission Working Group on the Gender Digital Divide, 2017. Available at broadbandcommission.org/Documents/publications/WorkingGroupDigitalGenderDivide-report2017.pdf

¹⁴ Lifting the veil on ICT gender indicators in Africa. Research ICT Africa, 2012. Available at researchictafrica.net/2016/06/07/lifting-the-veil-on-ict-gender-indicators-in-africa/

¹⁵ Women’s rights online digital gender gap audit. The Web Foundation, 2016. Available at: webfoundation.org/about/research/digital-gender-gap-audit/

¹⁶ Lifting the veil on ICT gender indicators in Africa. Research ICT Africa, 2012. Available at researchictafrica.net/2016/06/07/lifting-the-veil-on-ict-gender-indicators-in-africa/

APPETITE

» *ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use; Laws and Policies*

One of the biggest growing barriers is around appetite — that is, the awareness, desire, and fear for women and girls to use ICT. Security, privacy, and harassment risks, as well as a perceived lack of relevance of the Internet and of digital content, is actively putting female users off using ICT. These risks are underpinned by social norms and gender inequality and are disproportionately more acute for women than for men.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HARASSMENT (*ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use; Laws and Policies*) There are safety and security risks associated with online and mobile access, and women and girls face a disproportionate amount of digital harm. These concerns often act as a serious deterrent to women’s and girls’ ICT use—and again, are underpinned by gender norms and power imbalances. In environments which discourage women’s use of ICT, going online can pose a safety risk to women and girls breaking the traditional social order. Issues include a fear of harassment from strangers (such as unsolicited calls, unsolicited SMS, unsolicited online messages, or cyberbullying and harassment), as well as concerns about online data security and privacy. Safety, security, and harassment risks are particularly acute in relation to Internet and social media use—and, again, the risks are amplified in South Asia and other regions with strong gender norms and cultural perceptions about what women should and shouldn’t do.¹⁷ Once online, intimidation and harassment may inhibit women from fully engaging with the Internet, further restricting their use.

To understand the risks associated with ICT for women and girls in more detail, and how they can be mitigated, see the [Gender Digital Divide Risk Mitigation Technical Note](#), the companion piece to this document.

LACK OF RELEVANCE (*ADS 205 Domains: Access and Control; Cultural Norms and Beliefs; Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use; Laws and Policies*) Digital content often does not meet women’s specific wants and needs. Women also tend to report a lower level of understanding of the full potential of the Internet, and therefore report a perceived lack of value.¹⁸ Many women who are meant to benefit from digital development programs see no reason to be online. Localization of content and ease of use are critical factors: thousands of unwritten languages—some with a base of millions of speakers—are not represented in the digital form; and women’s digital literacy tends to be low.

¹⁷ The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. GSMA Connected Women, 2020. Available at www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf

¹⁸ Taking stock: Data and evidence on gender equality in digital access, skills, and leadership. United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society/International Telecommunications Union, 2019. Available at www.itu.int/en/action/gender-equality/Documents/EQUALS%20Research%20Report%202019.pdf



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| WHY DOES CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE MATTER?

ICT enables access to critical health services, as well as opportunities for education, civic participation, employment, entrepreneurship, and access to financing that were once out of reach for many people. It serves as a vital gateway for women to access information that can improve their livelihoods and significantly enhance their ability to contribute to their families and the global community.

Indeed, ICT offers opportunities for women and girls to overcome hurdles they may face in the physical world, enabling them to reach their full economic potential and to create more self-reliant communities. Access to, and use of, mobiles and the Internet also has an impact on women's empowerment, as well as on enhancing social cohesion and subverting gender norms. Yet, just as ICT is accelerating opportunities and impact across the world, women are being left behind. As economies increasingly digitize, persistent gender digital divides will lead to general economic, social, and opportunity divides. As ICT opens doors for men, unconnected women will face the risk of falling even further behind.

DOCUMENTS IN THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE GENDER ANALYSIS TECHNICAL RESOURCE



HOW TO USE THIS GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE GENDER ANALYSIS TECHNICAL RESOURCE



UNDERSTANDING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE



TOOL 1: GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS



TOOL 2: CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE TO IMPROVE USAID SECTOR OUTCOMES



TOOL 3: ADDRESSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN PROJECT AND ACTIVITY DESIGN



TOOL 4: GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS



RESOURCES 1–4: KEY DATA AND DOCUMENTS