

With an ID in Hand, Women Have More Economic Opportunities

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Key Takeaways:

- With a legal ID, women can more easily and legally register a business, secure land, be employed in the formal sector, open a bank account and buy a SIM card to use a mobile phone and access digital financial services. While women make do in the informal sector, they could earn more in the formal one and benefit from more protections, especially as employees.
- Women face additional barriers to obtain an ID in terms of cost, transportation, literacy, lack of fluency in dealing with government officials and numerous gendered social norms. Globally, discriminatory laws and practices are slowly being removed.
- Digital ID systems linked to biometric data have the potential to rapidly enrol millions of adults without an ID, but carry risks when legal safeguards to secure sensitive data are not in place.
- SGD 16.9 addresses Universal ID coverage: “By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration,” making it imperative to improve civil registration and ID systems, especially for women and girls.

How do legal IDs unlock women’s economic opportunities?

With a legal identification - like a passport or a national ID card - women and girls have a wider range of economic opportunities. Without one, women generally remain in the informal sector without legal protection, access to formal financial services, government entrepreneurship programmes, or the ability to bid on public tenders. It is almost impossible to, for example, register a business or secure land tenure without proof of ID. However, with an ID in hand, women can secure work in the formal sector, register and grow their businesses, and secure property rights. This presents an enormous opportunity; according to McKinsey & Company, “If women match men’s participation in the workforce [...] the additional opportunity could be \$28 trillion, or an additional 26% of annual global GDP in 2025.”¹ Obtaining legal identification in emerging economies can be complicated for women who are affected by low literacy levels, lack of governmental services in rural areas, high costs, discriminatory laws, and gendered social norms that impact their ability to engage in administrative processes on their own.

¹ McKinsey & Company, “[Ten Things to Know about Gender Equality](#)” September 21, 2020.

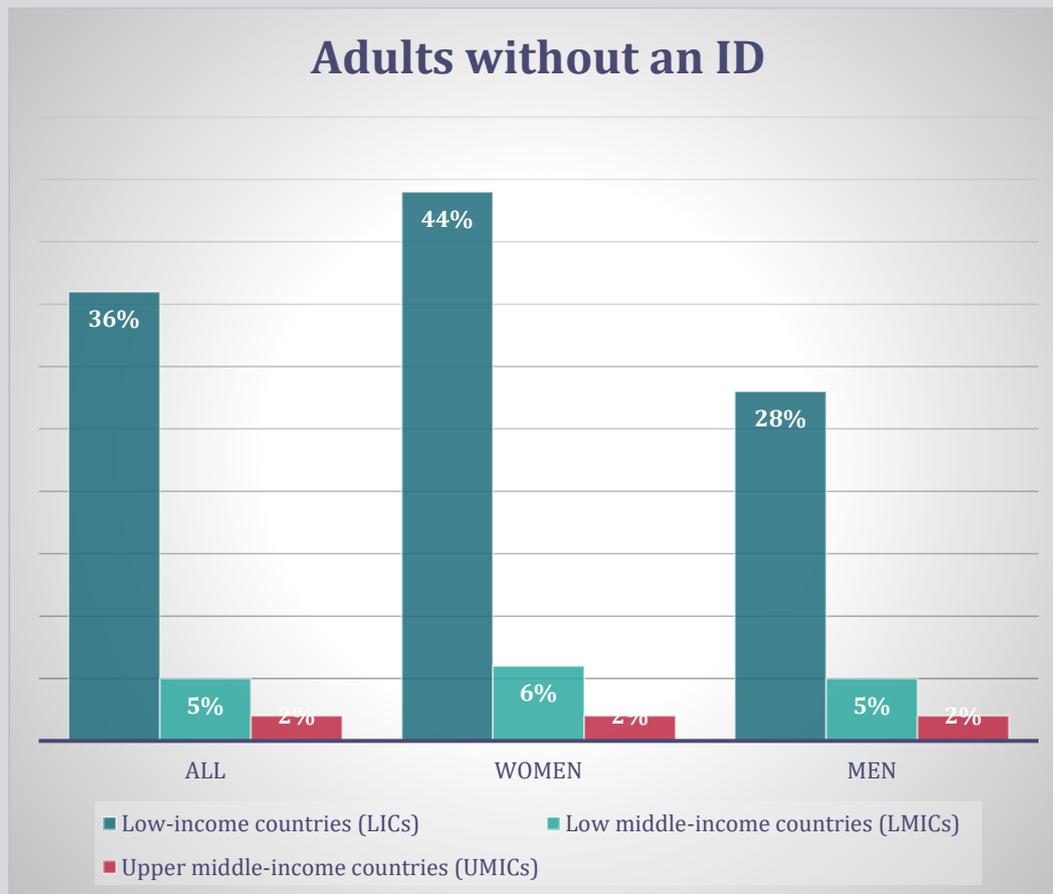


Figure 1: Share of adults without an ID, by type of economy. Source: Global Findex Database (2017). 1 billion adults (15 years old +) lack an ID. 44% of women and 28% of men in LICs don't have an ID. Additionally, 166 million children are not registered (UNICEF).

The best general predictors of *not* having an ID are being a woman, only primary educated, living in a rural area, and being in the bottom 40% of income distribution.² Older, married women working in the formal sector are the most likely women in low-income countries to own a legal ID.³ This knowledge should inform tailored policies, campaigns, and targeted actions, including providing more information about the value of having an ID, in addition to support services in obtaining one.

What are the barriers women face?

Women face multiple barriers obtaining a legal ID, delivered by the government, that serves multiple purposes (other types of IDs are 'functional' ones which usually serve only one purpose, such as a voter card or driver's licence). Among those barriers are:

- ***Discriminatory laws and practices:*** While the trend is to remove discrimination in law and practices, women still face different treatment in obtaining an ID in 31 countries. Additionally, cost, transportation, literacy,

² ID4D, "Global ID Coverage, Barriers and Use by the Numbers: An In-Depth Look at the 2017 ID4D-Findex Survey" 2019.

³ ID4D, "Global ID Coverage, Barriers and Use by the Numbers: An In-Depth Look at the 2017 ID4D-Findex Survey" 2019.

lack of fluency in dealing with government officials are among the most common barriers to registration, along with numerous social norms. Women must often make childcare arrangements and when they lack the documentation needed, they must make multiple trips to an ID registration centre.

- *Lack of gender approach:* Registration centres are staffed with few female agents, translators, have few accommodations for women (seating space, especially with children, toilets), women-only hours, etc.
- *Lack of use case:* because women tend to find workarounds, they don't necessarily see the value in having their own ID. The actual value of an ID is often not well communicated by officials. When women need an ID, they use someone else's (e.g., a sister's or husband's). However, once they understand the value of an ID and the benefits attached to having their own, they are more likely to register.
- *Limited 'feeder documents':* a birth certificate is an invaluable document necessary to obtain a national ID later in life; few other documents serve the purpose of identifying someone. However, women don't always have their birth certificate with them: her husband may have it, or she may not have gotten one from her hometown before she moved away for marriage. ID systems' reliance on birth certificates restricts women's ability to register for an ID.

With an ID in hand women can...

...register their businesses. Stepping into the formal sector allows women-owned businesses to access better sources of financing, technical assistance, bid on public tenders and participate in public procurement⁴ which is increasingly recognized as a gender equality tool, as well as increasing their access to trade and business networks. Increasingly, social media outlets like WhatsApp and Facebook are being used as e-commerce platforms, along with other digital platforms set up for that purpose, allowing registered businesses access to online markets. Many e-commerce platforms require an ID or business registration details to register, so those in possession of an ID can unlock these new digital markets. IFC estimates that the involvement of women in e-commerce represents a \$300 billion economic opportunity.⁵

...increase their financial inclusion. Progress on financial inclusion is measured by the World Bank with the Findex database. Global Findex data 2021 found that, in developing economies, the financing gender gap decreased from 9% in 2011 to 6% in 2021, with 68% of women in those economies owning an account versus 74% of men.⁶ Having an account at a financial institution and/or a mobile money provider allows access to more and better credit, products, and services, which is essential for women entrepreneurs. Greater access to IDs could deepen financial services access and financial inclusion.

...find work through digital platforms, allowing them potentially better paying and more flexible jobs in the formal economy, with better protection and wages. Peer-to-peer or business-to-peer digital platforms, for example, are virtual exchange places where workers offer their labour based on skills and availability. Ridesharing, personal services, delivery and logistics, and e-commerce platforms exist, and are part of the "gig economy." Platforms may

⁴ UN High Level Panel on WEE: "[Seven drivers and recommendations](#)".

⁵ IFC, "[Women and E-commerce: A \\$300 Billion Market Opportunity](#)" May 2021.

⁶ S. Ansar et al., "[Unveiling the Global Findex Database 2021 in Five Charts](#)" June 2022.

offer safer work conditions with identity verification,⁷ support systems for workers in case they need it, and generally better regulated hours than informal work.

...secure land use and access. Women’s participation in agriculture has ripple effects: “when women have access to the same productive assets as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30%, lifting 100–150 million people out of hunger.”⁸ Property ownership includes different realities, from titled ownership (evidenced by a deed) to reported ownership (joint property ownership, but only the husband’s name is on the deed or certificate) to access (the right to farm a plot of land, but that right that cannot be transferred to heirs or sold). Women’s access to land is often tied to marital status. The World Resource Institute notes that promising initiatives to improve the recognition of women on jointly held titles include attaching a photograph of both spouses in Ethiopia’s Amhara and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ regions. Indonesia created a similar program issuing certificates as equal owners to either a husband and wife or a brother and sister after the 2004 earthquake.⁹

...buy a SIM card, use the mobile internet. In 2021, GSMA explored the connection between access to mobile services and proof of identity.¹⁰ In 157 countries, registration of a SIM card requires people to have a legal proof of ID, and mandatory SIM card registration processes are increasing. GSMA reports that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, certain countries relaxed their identity requirements by implementing remote ID verification, accepting a wider range of IDs, or harmonizing SIM registration and mobile money KYC requirements.¹¹ A mobile phone can be used for financial transactions like cashing in/cashing out (CICO), [sending](#) and receiving money, and paying utility bills. A merchant ID allows any type of seller to receive payments from their customers and pay their vendors. The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated digital selling and marketing practices through online contactless payment systems, and digital marketing through social media (e.g., TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram).

Solutions and way forward

Having a legal ID allows women to access better services to grow their businesses or secure a job with better pay and protection. Having an ID increases access to and use of land, as well as access to a multitude of social services and civil processes (e.g., health, education, elections, the judiciary system, and protection of underage girls from early marriage). Principles and guidelines exist to improve registration systems by removing discriminatory practices and making it easier, faster, cheaper, and simpler for women to apply. The table below outlines the main barriers to ID provision for women, and examples of initiatives which have reduced them, and Figure 2 outlines key identification principles from the World Bank.

⁷ WhatsApp Business requires a photo ID; Instagram Business Account does not require a legal ID but does require a document that verifies the name of the business entity. These rules may vary by country. Other platforms, like Uber, require an ID (and a valid driver’s license) to register. See CGAP, [“Women in the Platform Economy: Emerging Insights”](#) May 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ World Resource Institute, [“Beyond Title: How to Secure Land Rights for Women”](#) March 2020.

¹⁰ GSMA, [“Access to Mobile Services and Proof of Identity 2021”](#)

¹¹ GSMA, [“Access to Mobile Services and Proof of Identity 2021”](#)



Figure 2: The World Bank’s *ID4D Group* has published key identification principles, along with tools and country diagnostics to better understand the context of each country and improve registration systems, along with key work on gender & ID.

Summary recommendations

Barriers/Challenges	Recommendations	Examples
SYSTEMIC BARRIERS		
Discrimination in the law	Make existing and new laws gender-neutral, with the same requirements for men and women.	Remove the need for a husband’s permission, use gender-neutral language (e.g., as Oman has recently done). Improve registration systems’ communications. E.g., Burkina-Faso’s two-witness affidavit to confirm identity at birth system is harder to implement for women who leave their villages when they marry.

in practice	Restrict civil and other agents entrusted to register women from creating additional steps that are not sanctioned by law.	<p>No longer require the presence of the husband during the registration process (e.g., as Afghanistan has done).</p> <p>Remove the need for a mother to produce marriage certificate to register a child, e.g., in Benin, an administrative circular removes the perceived requirement for married women to provide copy of marriage certificate when applying for a passport.</p>
Gender-blind processes	<p>Take into account the constraints that women face in accessing the ID process system including, for example, lack of childcare, lack of feeder documents (e.g., a birth certificate), time poverty, low literacy levels, rural disconnection, transportation to registration centres.</p> <p>Include women in the design of such processes.¹²</p>	<p>Dedicate women-only enrolment stations (e.g., as in Pakistan).</p> <p>Provide facilities for pregnant women and women with children (seating areas, toilets, nursing areas, etc.).</p> <p>Provide translators and transcribers.</p> <p>Translate documents into local languages (e.g., as Namibia does).</p>
Lack of sex-disaggregated data	Create a legal framework requiring collection and sharing of sex-disaggregated data to better understand gender gaps and create adequate policies.	Include sex and/or gender data in national identity numbers (e.g., as South Africa and Pakistan do).
Low birth registration	<p>Increase the number of locations where births can be registered.</p> <p>Allow single mothers to register their child at birth.</p>	<p>Include hospitals, maternities, health centres, schools.</p> <p>E.g., allowed in Guinea in 2019 and South Sudan in 2018.</p>

¹² Recommendation from the technical group [Women in Identity](#).

	Expand the birth registration period and waive late fees. ¹³	
REGISTRATION BARRIERS		
Few registration points for ID registration	<p>Decentralize the registration points and increase access to registration in rural areas.</p> <p>Include private sector partners (e.g., mobile network operators, local shops) and social service organisations in the process.</p>	<p>Include hospitals, maternity wards (e.g., as in Algeria), and schools as locations for ID registration.</p> <p>Include ID registration during vaccination campaigns (e.g., as in Côte d'Ivoire). Use mobile units (e.g., as in Chad, Bolivia, Malawi).</p> <p>Allow digital access.</p>
Few incentives for getting an ID	Advertise an IDs' capacity to access a host of services beyond proving identity.	<p>Allow ID holders to get scholarship priority (e.g., as in Tanzania).</p> <p>Require an ID for SIM card registration (e.g., as in Ghana, Senegal).</p>
Few authorized agents & networks and partners	Involve other civil and administrative agents, shopkeepers, mobile network agents, faith-based organisations, and other trusted organisations.	<p>Allow members get their IDs and birth certificates for their children through their savings groups (e.g., as in Mali).</p> <p>Support faith-based organisations in endorsing biometric data collection (e.g., as in Nigeria).</p>
Communications channels are not trusted	Design effective registration campaigns through trusted channels.	<p>Use word of mouth.</p> <p>Employ radio, TV, and social media to communicate information about ID enrolment.</p>
Lack of clarity about benefits of owning an ID	Provide clear information on the benefits of owning an ID.	<p>Prove one's identity.</p> <p>Register a business.</p> <p>Acquire land (e.g., as is the case in Rwanda).</p> <p>Access public and private services.</p> <p>Transmit nationality to children.</p> <p>Establish right to inheritance.</p> <p>Access to cash transfers (e.g., as in Pakistan).</p>

¹³ Recommendation from UNICEF

High costs	Eliminate costs or make them more affordable. This is the most common barrier.	Provide national identification number (NIN) with birth certificate at birth, or national ID, at no cost (Ghana, Mongolia).
Age requirement too high	Lower age requirement to obtain a national ID (and/or a NIN). Confirm ID with biometric data later in life (biometric data are stable from around 12 years old).	Examples of LICs that have already done so: Dem. Rep. of Korea, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone. Examples of LMICs that have already done so: Armenia, Honduras, India, Moldova, Pakistan.
Limited number of feeder documents	Birth certificates are the key feeder document to obtain a legal ID. Broaden the number of documents acceptable to confirm identity.	Affidavit (e.g., already accepted in Zambia), employment records and official documents (e.g., accepted in Malawi). Digitize birth certificates (e.g., as Benin does).
DIGITAL IDs		
Little protection from digital risks	Create legal frameworks that will protect sensitive data and build trust. Apply existing sets of principles.	Establish data protection laws (e.g., as in Burundi and Nepal). E.g., Principles on Identification for Sustainable Development toward the Digital Age; ID2020 Manifest.
Design and process is not gender inclusive	Include women in the design of the systems. Include women in governance of the systems.	Employ a code of conduct for design and governance, e.g., from Women in Identity.

The recommendations above highlight the need for “Public-Private-People” partnerships. Governments can simplify the registration process and make it gender-neutral, leveraging private sector networks of agents to reach the last mile with the involvement of trusted local organizations, used to working with women.

Legal IDs allow women to seize economic opportunities and enjoy more rights, governments to better understand and respond to the needs of their populations, and businesses to be able to serve a larger customer base with the confidence of knowing that those customers are well identified. Technological advances and the Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated the advent of digital IDs and the demand for mobile services (financial and commercial). However, data security is a concern; the legal structures and governance around data are not yet optimal, nor do they involve women in their design. Creating ID systems with a strong legal backbone with adequate protections will make it easier for women to acquire an ID. Providing ID will not improve women's economic empowerment by itself, much in the same way that having an account with a financial institution does not increase financial inclusion. An ID is only an instrument of change if women find value in it and use it, so communicating this use-case is also critical.

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For more resources and information on this topic, read the technical report [With an ID in Hand, Women Have More Economic Opportunities](#) (DCED, 2023) which includes two case studies, on Digital IDs and IDs for Women Refugees. Sophie Romana authored both this policy brief, and the associated report. With thanks to the United States Agency for International Development, World Bank, International Finance Corporation, German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH for providing guidance and advice.