INTERNET USE IN 2024

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There are **5.35 billion** people using the internet in 2024, equating to **66.2 percent** of the world's total population. Internet users have grown by **1.8 percent** over the past year, with **97 million** new users coming online for the first time during 2023.

Internet adoption rates may have slowed since the rapid increases we saw during the middle of the last decade, but millions of people still come online for the first time each month.

Our analysis of data from reputable organisations including the ITU, GSMA Intelligence, and Eurostat indicates that **97 million** people started using the internet for the first time over the past 12 months, delivering a year-on-year increase of **1.8 percent**.

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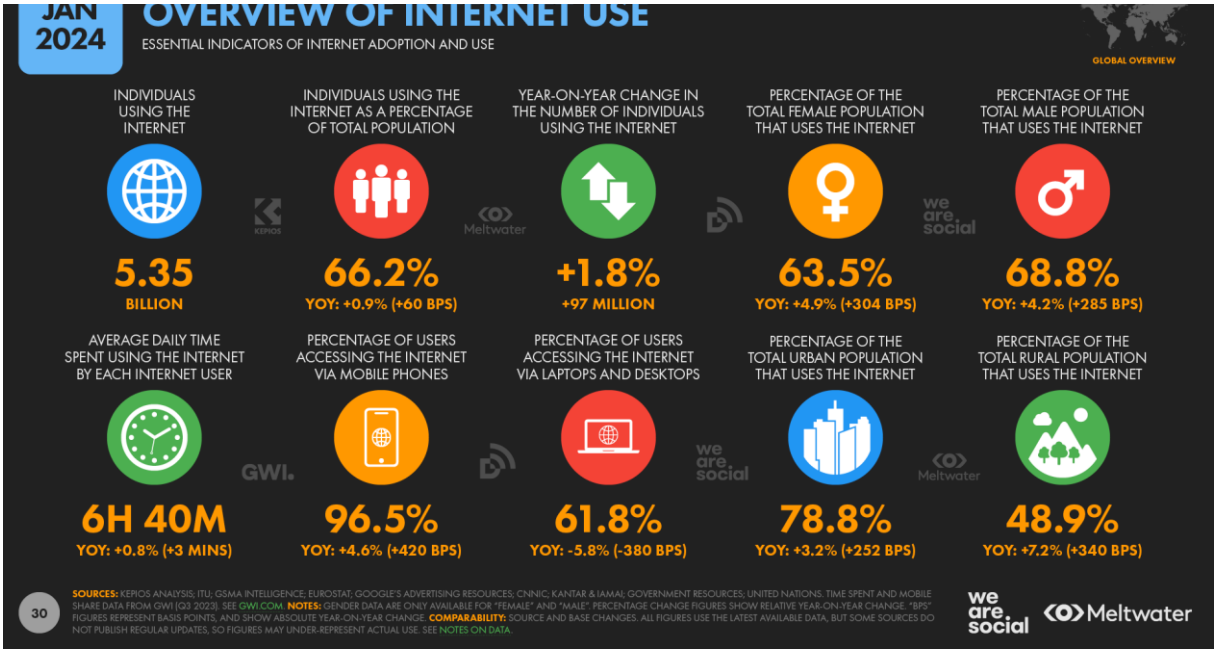

And these latest growth figures bear an uncanny resemblance to those that we published this time last year.

In our Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, we reported annual internet user growth of 1.9 percent, with 98 million new users coming online during 2022.

As always though, the growth rates we report are dependent on the availability of new data, and our latest figures usually tend to underestimate actual use.

Indeed, since we published that 2023 report, new data shows that internet users likely increased by more than 150 million during 2022, and the actual growth rate was closer to 3 percent.

As a result, we expect to see this year's growth rate increase from its current 1.8 percent over the next few months too.

Either way though, the net takeaway will still be the same: internet access continues to improve.
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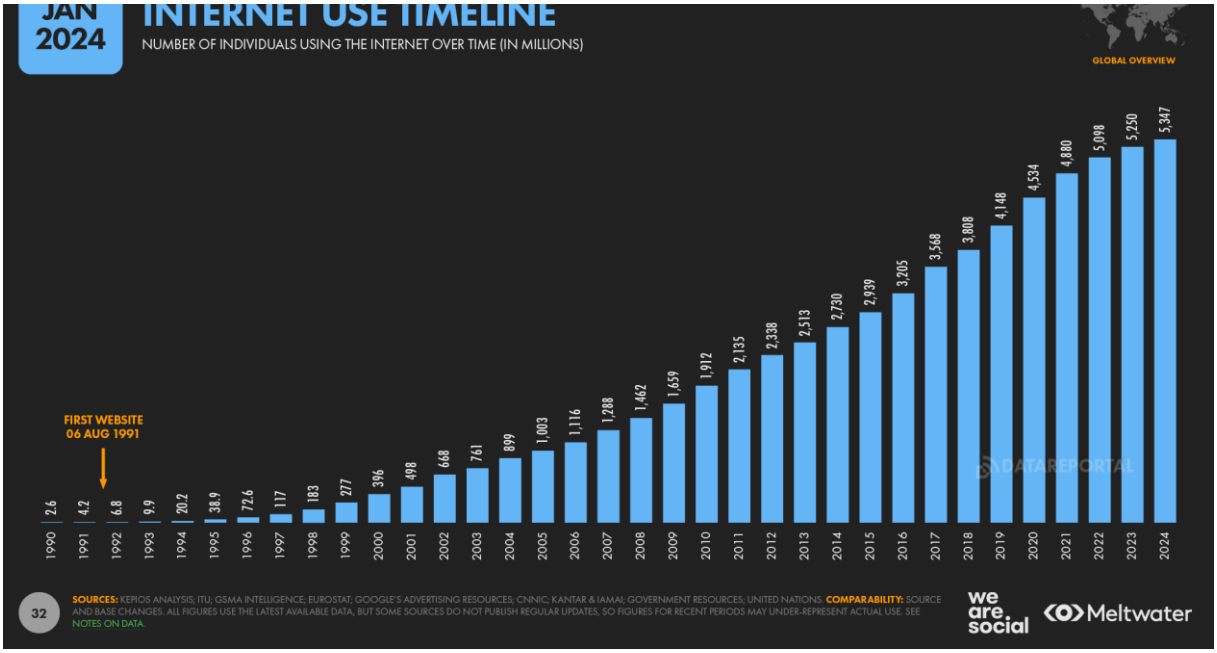

Internet users approaching supermajority

The latest country-level data indicate that global internet penetration now sits at **66.2 percent**.

This means that we're only a few **basis points** short of internet users reaching "**supermajority**" status, when twice as many people will be using the internet as not.

Based on current growth rates, we expect internet adoption to reach this important milestone sometime around the middle of 2024, although it's worth highlighting that the ITU's latest projections suggest that we may already have reached it.

However, **Kepios** analysis of the latest local country data suggests that we're still more than 40 million users short of the user total required for internet users to achieve supermajority status.
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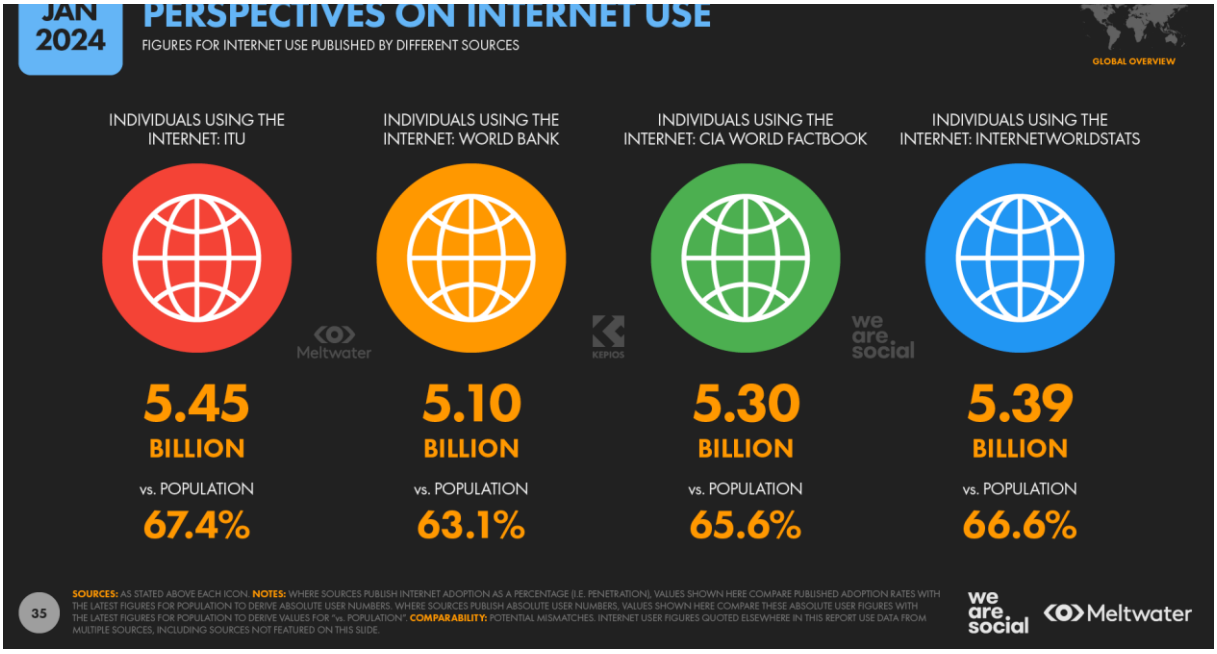

Internet adoption around the world

A total of 13 countries now report internet penetration of 99 percent or higher, suggesting that almost everyone in these countries who wants to use the internet – and is able to do so – is already online.

Data suggests that the **Nordics** see the highest rates of internet adoption, with both **Norway** and **Denmark** reporting internet use of 99 percent and above.

Sweden and **Finland** aren't far behind though, with adoption rates of 98.1 percent and 97.8 percent (respectively) at the start of 2024.

Richer states in the Middle East also boast impressive rates of internet adoption, with **Bahrain**, **Kuwait**, **Qatar**, **Saudi Arabia**, and the **United Arab Emirates** all reporting online penetration in excess of 99 percent of the total population.
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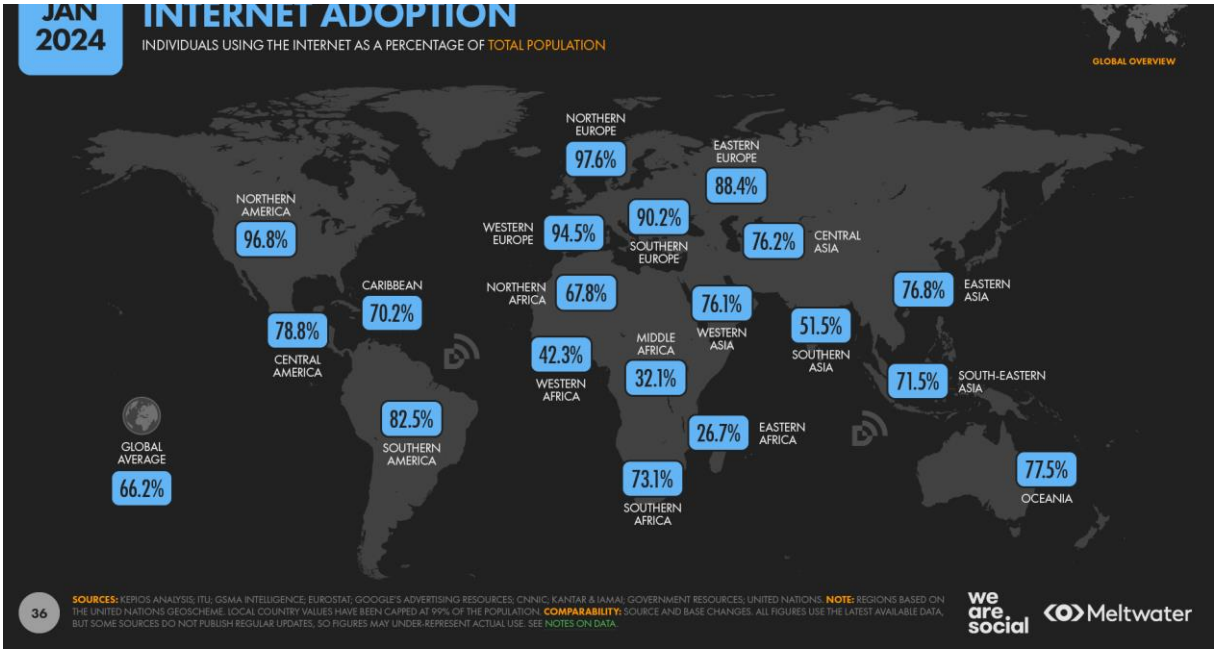

Billions still offline in 2024

However, we're still a long way away from achieving the UN's **stated goal** of universal connectivity by 2030, and current growth rates suggest that it's increasingly unlikely we'll reach this target.

Disappointingly, internet adoption remains below 25 percent in a total of 12 countries at the start of 2024, although **North Korea** is now the only country where internet access remains below 10 percent.

For context, the internet remains blocked for everyday citizens of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, leaving more than 26 million people in the reclusive North Asian state offline.

A further 8 nation states see local internet adoption rates languish below 20 percent, although – encouragingly – internet adoption has increased across all of these countries over the past year.

And on another encouraging note, just 54 countries and territories out of a total of 233 for which we have internet user data see internet penetration rates below 50 percent, meaning that over half the population is now online in more than three-quarters of the world's countries.
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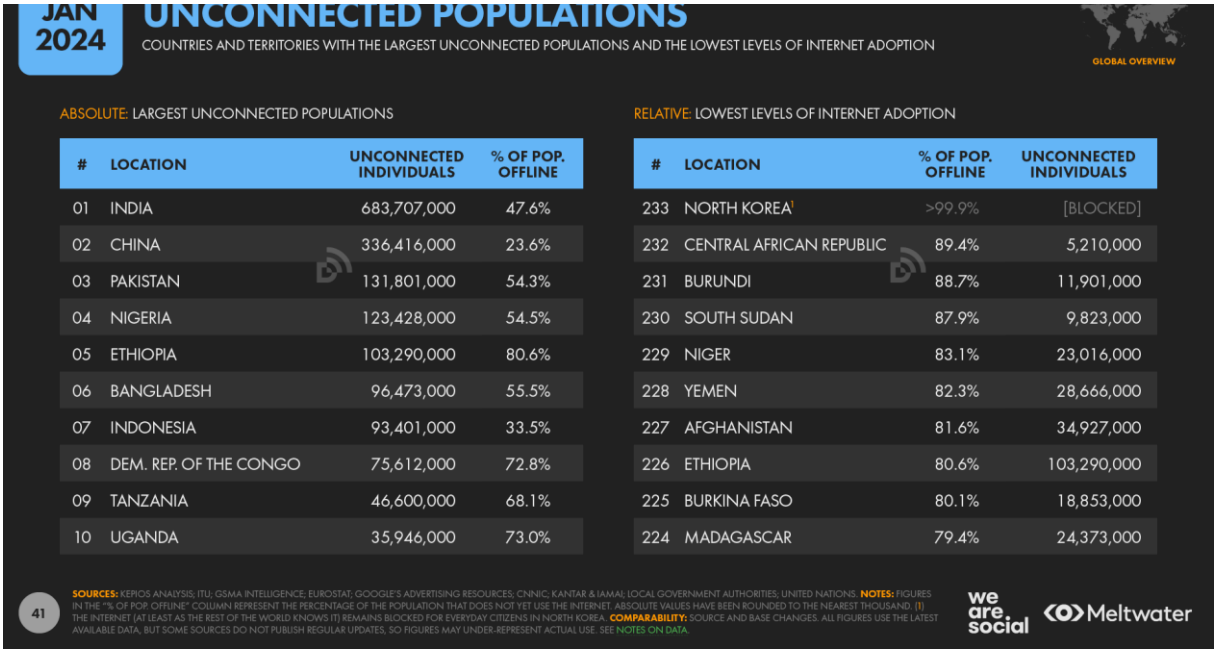

In absolute terms, **India** continues to top the rankings for the world's largest unconnected population, and more than **680 million** people remain offline in the world's most populous nation.

However, **reports** suggest that internet adoption in India increased by close to 10 percent between 2021 and 2022, with roughly 65 million people coming online for the first time during that period [*side note: that 2022 study was the last "major" update to internet adoption figures for India, which is why our latest growth figure for the country looks quite low*].

China has the world's second largest unconnected population, despite enjoying an internet penetration rate in excess of 75 percent.

The latest data from **CNNIC** indicates that **336 million** people remain offline across China, although that total has fallen by more than 11 million over the past year.

In total, these figures indicate that more than **1 billion people** remain offline across China and India alone, although it's also worth highlighting that these two countries are home to more than 1 in 3 people on Earth.

At a regional level, unconnected populations are highest across **Southern Asia** and **Eastern**, **Middle**, and **Western Africa**, although it's encouraging to report that fewer than 1 billion people remain offline across Southern Asia at the start of 2024.
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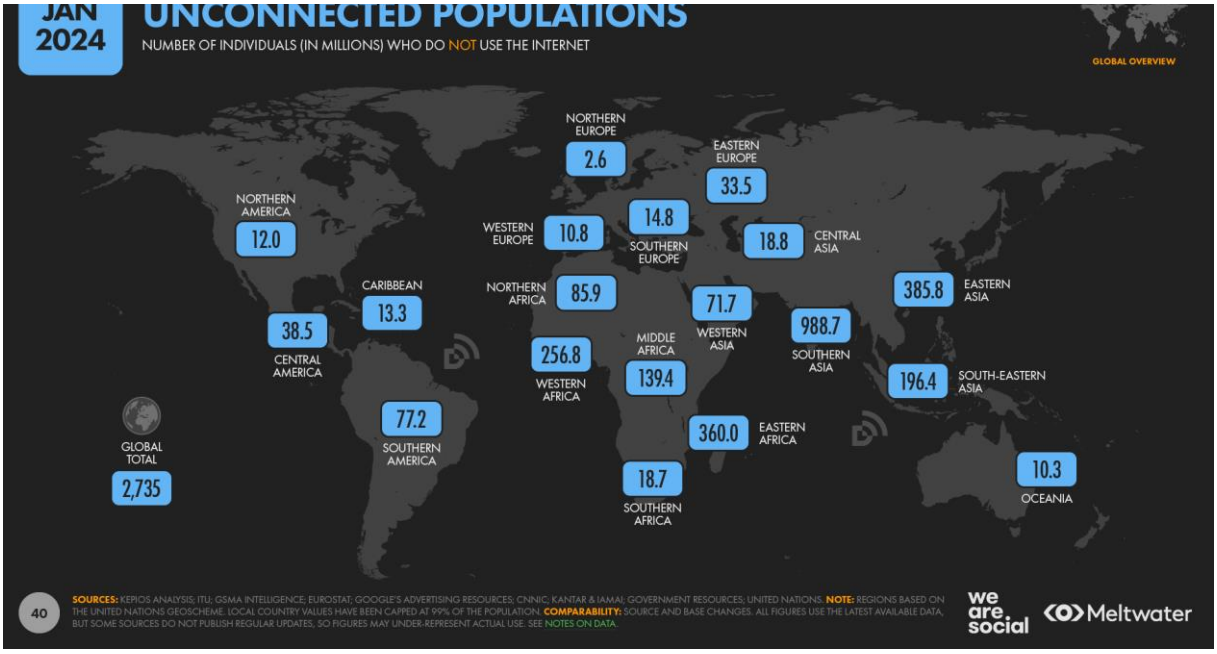

Towards universal internet access

Various factors impede our progress towards achieving universal connectivity, including economic challenges, insufficient infrastructure, and societal issues.

Indeed, in its excellent "**State of Mobile Connectivity 2023**" report, GSMA Intelligence highlights three primary barriers to individuals' adoption and use of the internet on mobile devices:

1. Affordability, particularly of mobile handsets
2. A lack of literacy
3. A lack of "digital skills"

We'll explore each of these issues in more detail below, together with various other factors that continue to hamper the world's progress towards universal connectivity.

However, it's important to stress that we shouldn't just measure internet "access" in terms of *quantity* – i.e. user numbers alone.

It's also critically important to understand how the *quality* of internet connectivity varies around the world, and how it's changing over time.

The evolving quality of internet access merits analysis of its own though, so we've prepared a separate **Digital 2024 Deep Dive** article on this topic, which you can read in full here.

Politics and war

Armed conflict presents significant challenges to improving internet connectivity.

Indeed, with the exception of North Korea, armed conflicts affect all of those countries where internet access remains below 20 percent, and **reports** indicate that each of these conflicts has claimed more than 1,000 lives over the past year.

Meanwhile, armed conflicts continue to affect 14 of the world's 20 least-connected nations.

But even without the shadow of war, politics regularly determine whether or not people are able to access the internet, as well as the extent to which they are able to access the full breadth of connected services.

As we've already seen, North Korea's government continues to prevent its country's citizens from accessing the internet.

However, restrictions on connectivity are often more insidious than these blanket bans.

For example, while data shows that almost 40 percent of the population of **Turkmenistan** now has access to the internet, it also shows that barely 1.7 percent of the country's population was able to access international social media platforms in December 2023.

This means that just 4.3 percent of the country's internet users are able to access foreign social media services, ranking the country second-to-bottom behind **Eritrea** in our latest analysis of social media access.

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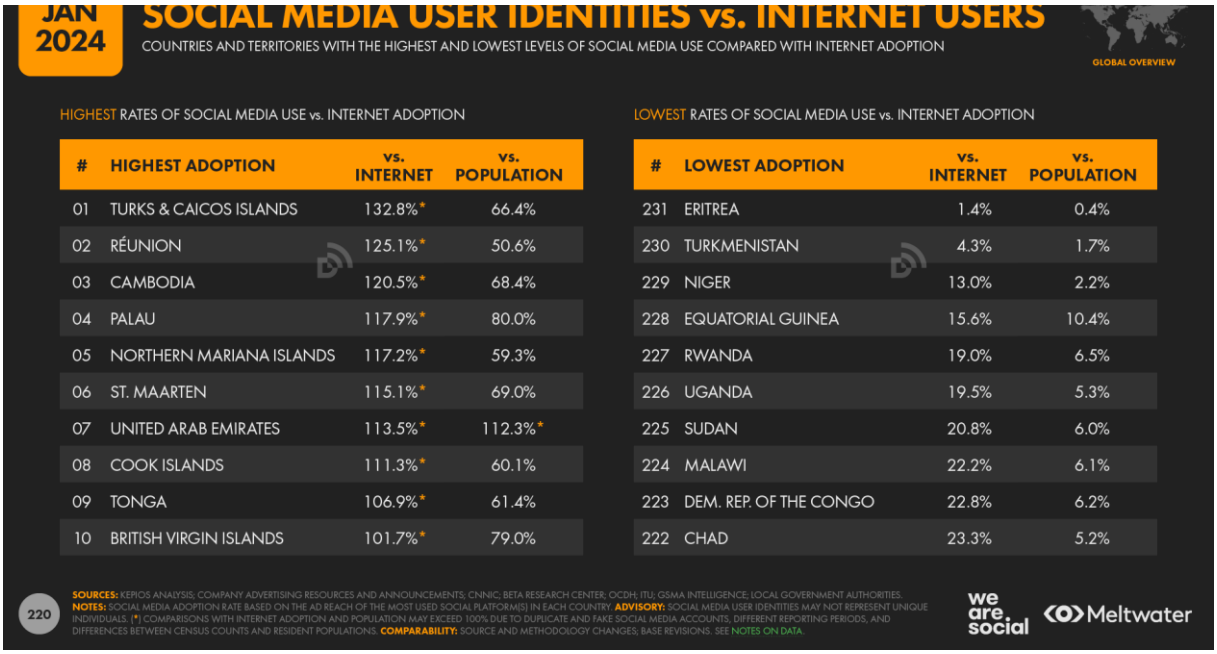

Infrastructure challenges

Beyond politics, infrastructure is another of the most important considerations when it comes to improving global connectivity.

For example, data from the World Bank shows that less than half of the population has access to electricity in 10 of the world's 20 least-connected nations.

The latest numbers indicate that barely 1 in 13 people in South Sudan has access to electric power (7.7 percent), while less than 20 percent of the population has electricity in the Central African Republic, Burundi, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Malawi.

Moreover, access to basic drinking water services remains a major challenge across many of these countries, highlighting that there may be other, even more pressing concerns to address before we can progress to ensuring access to the internet.

For example, in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Niger, Burkina Faso, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than half of the population either does not have access to safe drinking water sources, or must walk more than 30 minutes from their home to access such supplies.
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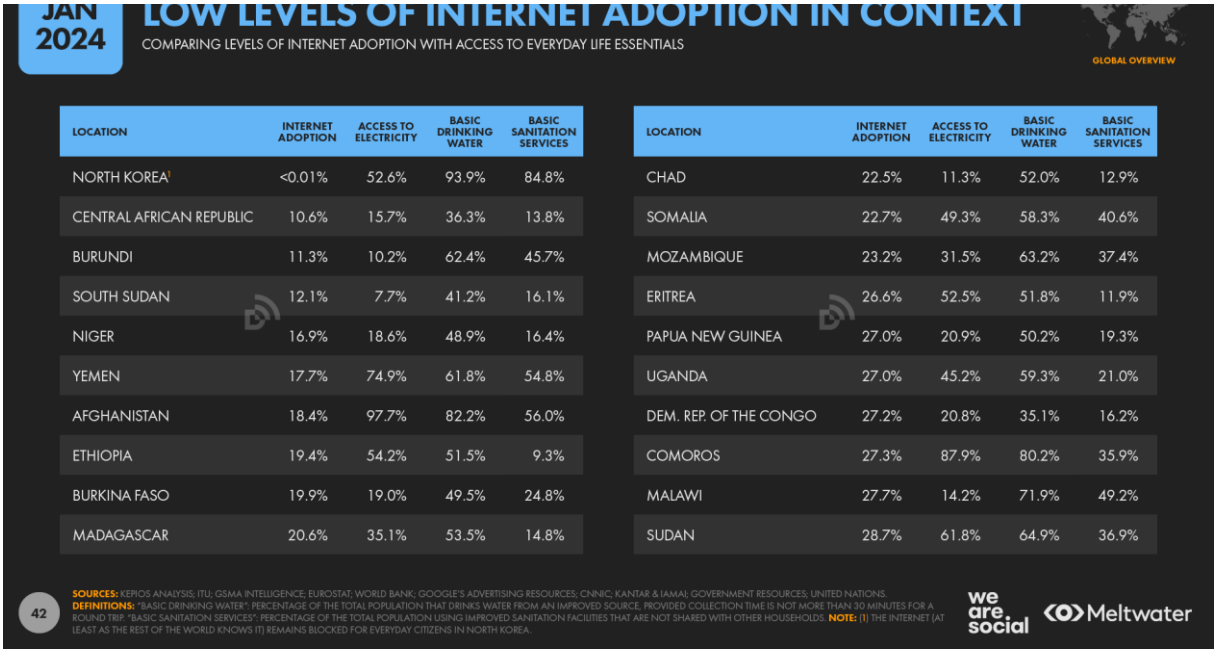

Mobile coverage improving

On a more positive note, GSMA Intelligence reports that just 5 percent of the world's population remains out of the reach of broadband mobile networks.

Half of these people have access to 2G mobile networks, but these services are largely ineffectual when it comes to delivering mobile internet services.

As a result, almost 400 million people remain "uncovered" by the infrastructure required to provide internet access, and GSMA Intelligence reports that "*it seems unlikely that significant gains will be achieved* [in this regard] *in the near future without a major technological shift*".

Lack of internet awareness

While it may come as a surprise to readers who can't imagine their lives *without* the internet, recent research indicates that hundreds of millions of people still do not know that the internet even *exists*.

GSMA Intelligence's *State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2023* report **reveals** that almost half – 46 percent – of the 128 million people living in Ethiopia are still unaware of the possibility of accessing the internet on mobile phones.

This problem is particularly acute in rural **Ethiopia**, which is home to more than three-quarters of the country's total population.

The latest research indicates that less than half of those people living in rural areas of the country were aware of mobile internet in 2023, highlighting the extent of the challenges associated with delivering universal access.

Meanwhile, GSMA Intelligence's research indicates that roughly 1 in 3 people in India remains *unaware* of mobile internet, which equates to more than **480 million** people.

And for added context, that figure equates to more than **70 percent** of the 684 million people who remain offline in India today.

However, that leaves more than 200 million people in India who are aware of mobile internet, but who remain offline.

The price of internet access

Affordability remains another primary challenge, with the price of devices and data continuing to pose challenges in less-developed economies.

The price of a device

The cost of internet-enabled mobile handsets is a particularly gnarly challenge, and GSMA Intelligence **reports** that this is the single most important barrier to getting people online once they're aware of mobile internet.

The organisation's research indicates that the median price of an entry-level, internet-enabled handset across lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs) increased by almost 10 percent over the past year, from USD $42 to $46.

For context, while this price is barely 6 percent of the price of an entry-level iPhone 15, it's still a huge outlay for people in the world's poorest countries.

GSMA Intelligence reports that even the most basic "internet phone" costs the equivalent of roughly **one-third** of monthly income for the typical person across Southern Asia, and it's not far off that figure across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The cost of data

Meanwhile, studies by the ITU indicate that the ongoing cost of internet access (i.e. data) exceeds 10 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita in a total of 15 countries, many of which feature in our ranking of the world's least connected nations.
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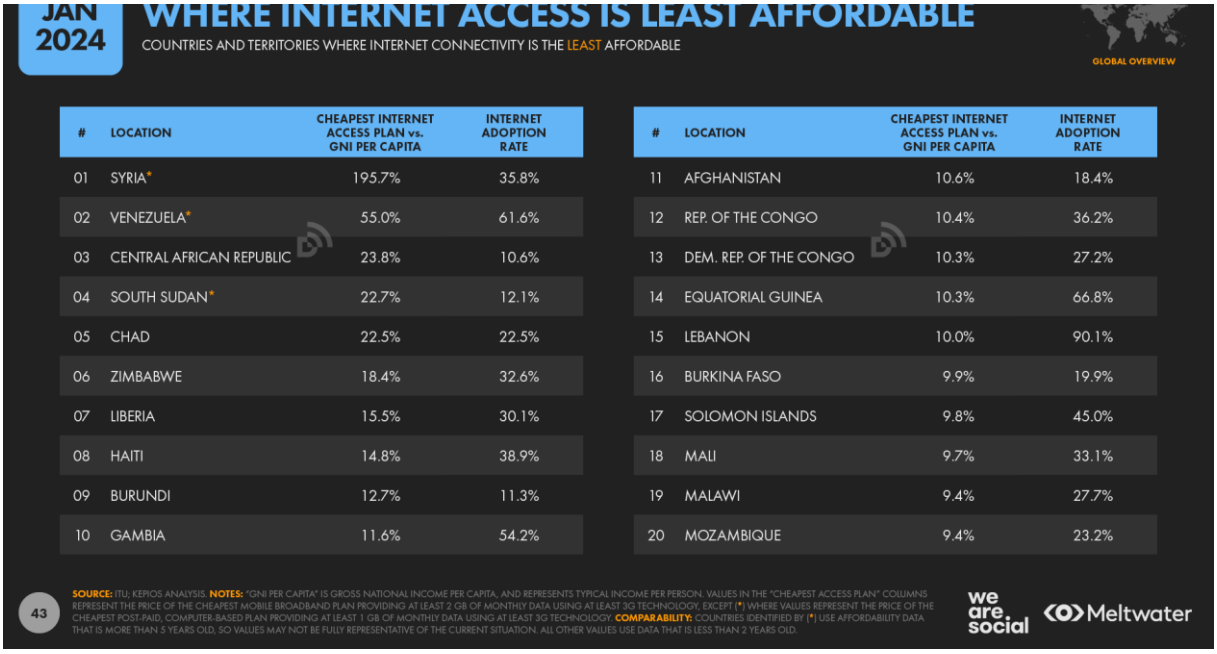

Using slightly different bases for comparison, cable.co.uk **reports** that the average cost of 1GB of mobile data exceeded 10 percent of the national average monthly income in a total of six countries in 2023.

Moreover, that cost equalled more than *one-third* of the average monthly income in half of those countries: South Sudan, **Zimbabwe**, and the Central African Republic.
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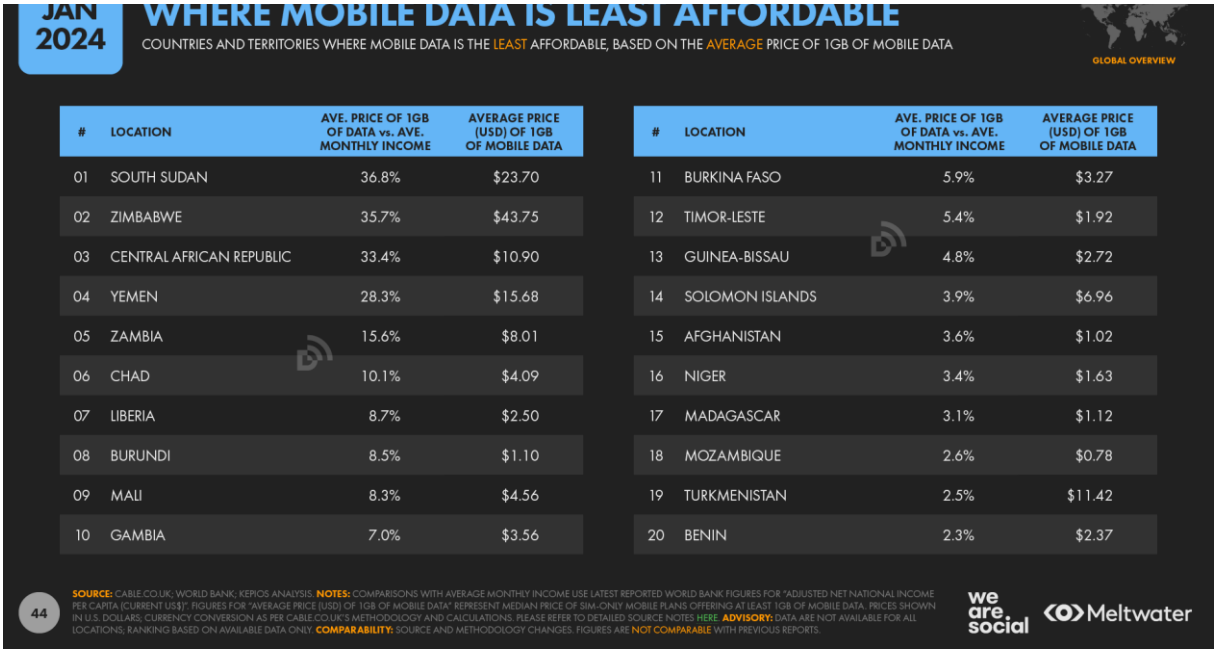

Meanwhile, access to fixed internet data plans tends to be even *less* affordable.

Another cable.co.uk **study** from 2023 indicates that the average cost per **1Mbps** of fixed internet bandwidth exceeds 10 percent of the average monthly income in 19 countries.

Alarmingly, that figure was more than 1,200 percent in Burundi, meaning that the average cost of just 1Mbps of fixed data bandwidth was equal to *a full year's income*.

The situation was only marginally better in Eritrea, where 1Mbps of fixed internet bandwidth typically costs around 9 times more than the average monthly income.

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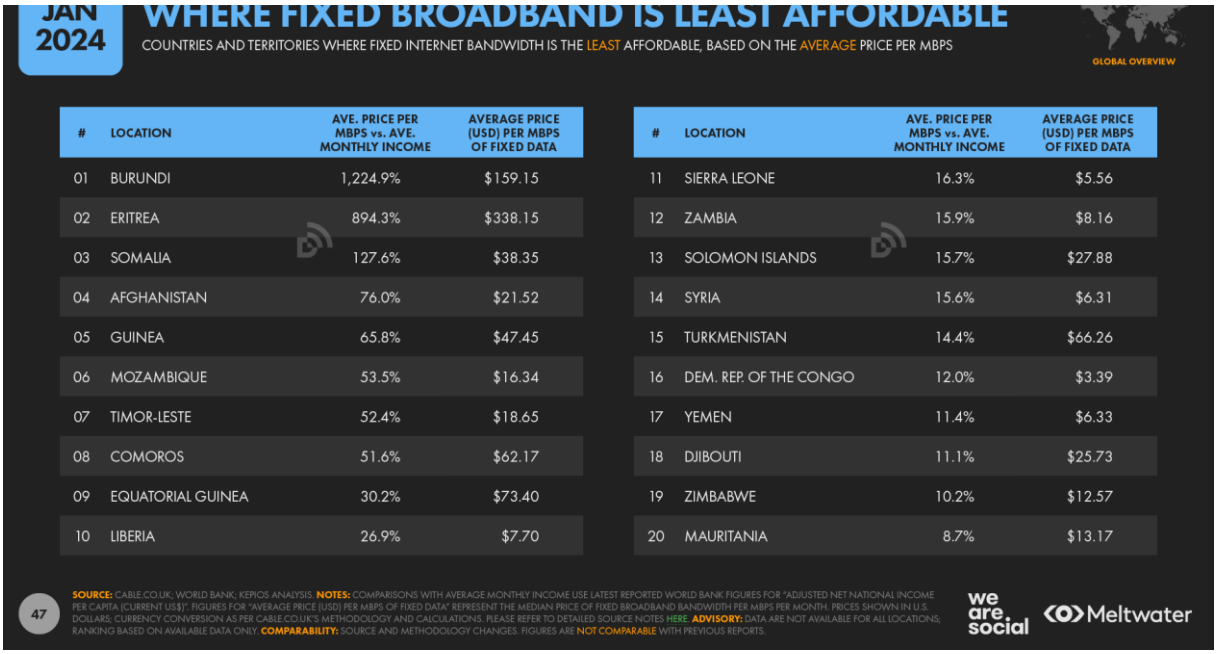

Broader research **published** by the ITU also indicates that cost is the primary reason why people remain offline in less developed economies like Zimbabwe and **Côte D'Ivoire**.

However, despite the importance of economic barriers, the cost of access is only one of the reasons that people in these geographies offer when explaining why they do *not* currently use the internet.

No perceived need for the internet

Interestingly, one of the most commonly cited reasons for not using the internet is that the individual sees no clear *need* to go online.

Research by the ITU **indicates** that this is the primary reason for remaining offline across the world's most developed economies, but it's a common reason in other economic settings too.

For example, in a 2021 **survey**, China's Bureau of Statistics found that 10 percent of those people who did not use the internet said they saw no need for it.

That figure suggests that – at the time of the study – more than 40 million people in China did not see a compelling reason to go online.

Similarly, GSMA Intelligence **found** that a lack of perceived relevance was an important consideration across countries in Southern Asia, with respondents in Bangladesh particularly likely to state that "*the internet is not relevant for me*".

Insufficient digital skills

Insufficient knowledge of how to use a mobile phone and mobile internet services remains another key barrier preventing millions of people from coming online.

These issues are particularly important across Southern Asia, which is home to the world's largest unconnected population.

For example, 15 percent of Indians who know that they can access the internet on a mobile phone, but do not yet do so, **cite** a lack of knowledge of *how* to access the internet on a mobile handset as the primary barrier to getting online.

This is also a key challenge in **Indonesia**, where 15 percent of those in a similar position cited the same problem.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, a broader lack of knowledge of how to use a mobile phone was a primary barrier, with 8 percent of people who were already aware of mobile internet citing this as a key reason why they do not yet use the internet.

The urban-rural divide

Where people live also has an important impact on their likelihood of using the internet.

For example, data published by the ITU (**Excel file**) suggests that people living in urban settings are 38 percent *more likely* to use the internet than those living in rural locations.

Similarly, our analysis of the latest data suggests that just under half of rural populations (48.9 percent) use the internet today, compared with nearly 4 in 5 people (78.8 percent) living in towns and cities.

Analysis by GSMA intelligence suggests a narrower gap, but even in their latest research, the organisation **states** that "*adults living in rural areas are 29 percent less likely than those living in urban areas to use mobile internet*".

This imbalance may be partly explained by the differences in infrastructure that we explored above, with coverage of mobile networks and access to electricity both important considerations.

However, on average, the world's rural populations also tend to be less educated and financially less well off than their urban peers, with these factors exacerbating infrastructural challenges.

Interestingly though, multi-country research **published** by the ITU suggests that – on average – people living in rural areas are actually *less* likely than people living in towns and cities to say that they "don't need" the internet, indicating that people in rural areas perceive internet access to be **more important** than people living in urban centres.

And research from GSMA Intelligence echoes this finding, although the differences in perception between urban and rural respondents were smaller than those in the ITU's study.

The digital gender gap

But perhaps the most frustrating barrier to achieving universal internet access relates to gender imbalances.

For context, data from the ITU indicates that – at a worldwide level – women are **7.7 percent** less likely to use the internet than men.

That's a slight improvement on the 8.3 percent difference that we saw this time last year, but the latest data suggest that – at a worldwide level – there are **240 million** fewer women than men using the internet today.

For perspective, amongst the global population as a whole, men outnumber women by roughly 40 million, but even once we allow for this imbalance, it's clear that women face more challenges when it comes to gaining access to the internet.

And these troubling findings aren't limited to the ITU's data

A persistent problem

Research by GSMA Intelligence highlights that women are significantly less likely than men to use the internet across lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and **900 million** women in these areas remained offline in 2023.

As the organisation **reports** in its latest *State of Mobile Internet Connectivity* (SOMIC) report,

"*More women in LMICs are using mobile internet than ever before, but their rate of adoption has slowed for the second year in a row. While 61 percent of women across LMICs now use mobile internet, only 60 million women started using mobile internet in 2022, compared to 75 million in 2021.*"

The report's authors go on to state:

"*The gender gap in mobile internet remains relatively unchanged; women in LMICs are 19 percent less likely than men to use it, which equates to around 310 million fewer women than men. In 2022 there [were] no significant changes in the mobile internet gender gap in any region.*"

For context, mobile internet use is a particularly important indicator when assessing digital access and adoption amongst women, as **detailed** in another GSMA Intelligence report:

"*Mobile phones remain the primary, and often only, way that people in LMICs access the internet, especially women. Most users in [these] countries access [the internet] exclusively via mobile, and in all survey countries, a higher proportion of female internet users access it exclusively via mobile.*"

The SOMIC 2023 report shows that the digital gender divide is most apparent in Southern Asia, where women remain **41 percent** less likely than men to use mobile internet, which is the same ratio we saw this time last year.

But Sub-Saharan Africa also sees a significant gender imbalance in internet access, with women in the region still **36 percent** less likely than men to be using the internet today.

Social inequality

And these patterns are evident in the latest social media data too.

Kepios analysis of the latest advertising reach data published by all of the top platforms reveals that men consistently outnumber women on social media, and in some cases by an alarming margin.

For example, **Facebook**'s worldwide ad reach skews 57 percent male to 43 female, based on the self-declared gender of users themselves.

More specifically, out of the 2.19 billion users that marketers can reach with adverts on Facebook, male users outnumber women by 1.24 billion to 939 million [*note that Facebook's figures for "female" and "male" audiences don't sum to the overall total, although it's unclear whether the difference is simply due to rounding in the source data, or whether the difference represents users of non-binary gender*].

That means the "typical" Facebook user is almost *one-third* more likely to be male than female.

The global audiences of **Instagram** and **TikTok** are more evenly balanced, but even here, men outnumber women by a factor of 2.3 percent and 8.5 percent (respectively).

However, once we start to look at social media reach by region, a far less balanced picture emerges.

Even once we allow for variations in the use of different platforms by gender, it's clear that women across Southern Asia and Central Africa are *significantly* less likely to use social media than men.
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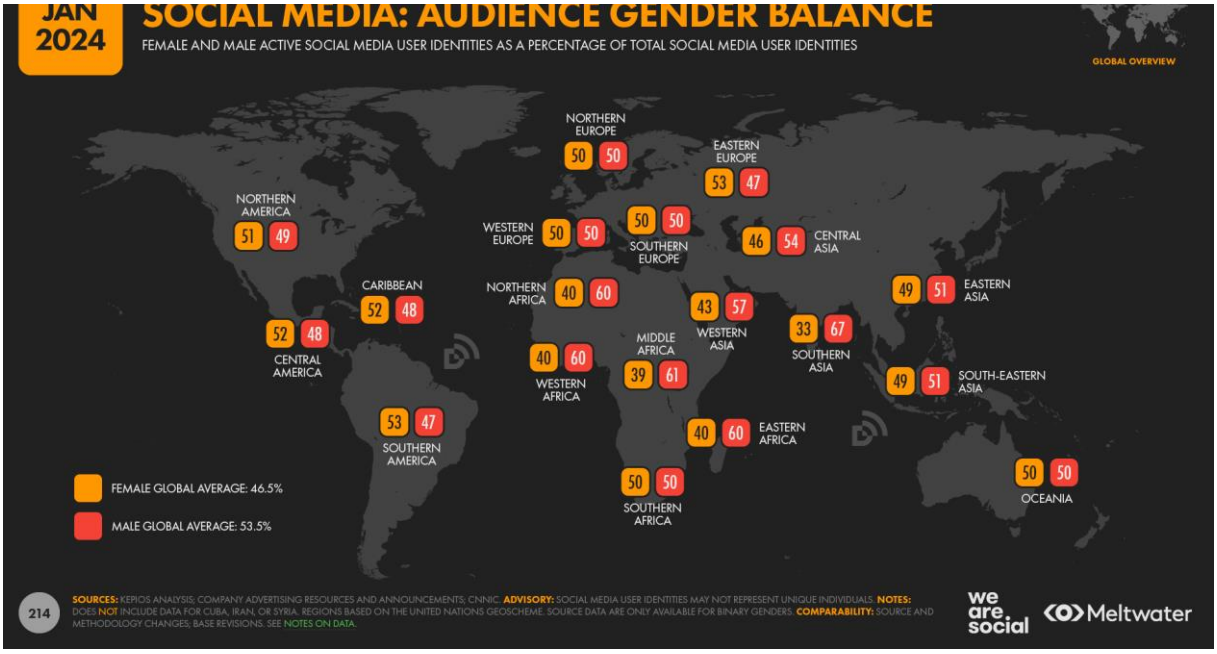

Indeed, across Southern Asia as a whole, male users outnumber female users by a factor of 2 to 1.

And in **Afghanistan**, that ratio sits at almost 7 to 1, with men accounting for a massive *84.4 percent* of the country's social media user base.

Meanwhile, male users outnumber female users by a factor of more than 3 to 1 in a further five countries around the world – **Niger**, **Yemen**, **Tajikistan**, **Mali**, and **Sudan** – while the ratio remains above 2 to 1 in a total of 18 nations.

But *why* does this digital gender gap persist?

Causes of the digital gender divide

In a **dedicated report** exploring this very issue, GSMA Intelligence explains that a primary issue relates to fundamental awareness:

"*Women are still less likely than men to be aware of mobile internet across low and middle-income countries.*

For example, less than half of the female population in Ethiopia is aware of mobile internet.

In other words, more than **33 million** women in the world's eleventh most populous nation still do not know that mobile internet *exists*.

And the situation is only marginally better in the world's most populous country – India – where more than 40 percent of women remain unaware of mobile internet.

But awareness isn't the only issue.

As GSMA Intelligence's latest Mobile Gender Gap Report highlights (emphasis mine),

"In most survey countries, awareness is relatively high, but [this] ***does not always translate into adoption****."*

So, given that women's awareness of the internet has been improving, what might be behind this slower "translation" of awareness into adoption?

The report highlights three primary barriers:

1. Affordability, primarily of mobile handsets
2. Literacy and digital skills
3. Safety and security

While these themes echo those that we saw above for overall internet adoption, the inclusion of "safety and security" has particular relevance, and the report highlights that "*millions more women than men face these barriers*".

Literacy remains a primary concern

After the price of mobile handsets, difficulties with reading and writing are amongst the most common reasons cited for not owning a mobile phone, and therefore for not using mobile internet.

Low levels of literacy have a particularly profound impact on internet adoption amongst women, with female respondents to GSMA's 2023 survey significantly more likely to reference these issues compared with men.

Indeed, nearly 1 in 3 women in Ethiopia cite literacy as a primary barrier to mobile connectivity, while that number sits at roughly 1 in 4 in **Pakistan** and Bangladesh.

At a global level, the latest data suggests that women's literacy rates trail those of men by 6.5 percentage points.

In simple terms, this means that – around the world – there are roughly **300 million** fewer literate women than men.

And for context, it's likely that the origins of this gender imbalance are similar to the origins of the digital gender divide.
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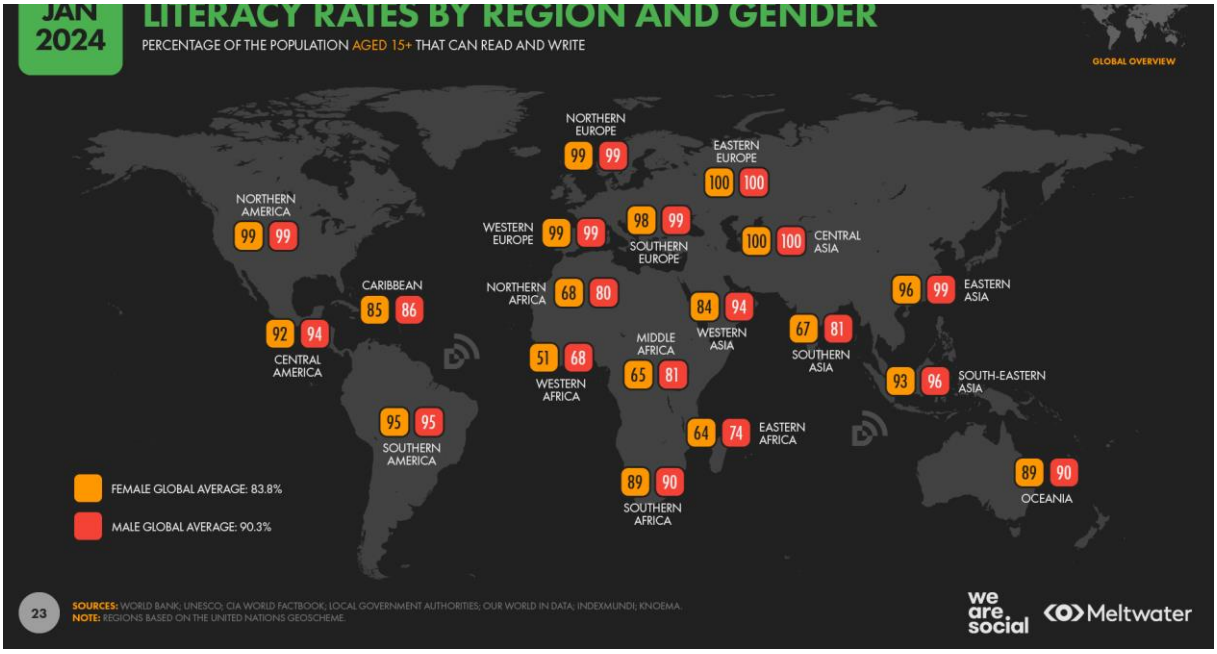

"Forbidden" to use the internet

However, there's one particularly disturbing barrier to internet adoption that merits further investigation.

Various studies reveal that misogyny remains a stubbornly prevalent barrier to women's ability to use the internet.

For example, more than 1 in 5 women (22 percent) who do not own a mobile phone in Pakistan **cite** "*family disapproval*" as a primary reason.

And the same GSMA Intelligence study found that these patriarchal attitudes are only marginally less restrictive in **Bangladesh**, where 1 in 7 women say they face similar issues today.

For perspective, "reading and writing difficulties" were the most commonly cited reason amongst women in Bangladesh for not owning a mobile phone (23 percent), followed by not knowing how to use a mobile (17 percent), and then family disapproval (14 percent).

Meanwhile, a 2021 **study** conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that 9.3 percent of the country's offline population said that they were "*not allowed to use the internet*".

It's important to highlight that this issue affected both genders, and 7.3 percent of unconnected males also cited this as a reason for not using the internet.

However, women were *fifty percent* more likely to cite a lack of "permission" as a primary reason why they did not use the internet, with almost **11 percent** of respondents selecting this response.

Assuming that these attitudes remain at similar levels today, they would be responsible for preventing roughly **6 million women** from using the internet in Bangladesh alone.

A man-made problem

However, when given the chance, most women actively embrace the opportunity to use the internet.

As GSMA Intelligence **stresses** in its Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023,

"*Most women who use mobile internet report that it has had a positive impact on their lives, and that they use it every day.*"

Similarly, when women don't have to contend with misogyny in order to go online, they're more likely than men to use connected services like social media.

Indeed, female social media users outnumber male users across the Americas and Europe, and they're almost equal across Eastern Asia, despite a meaningfully larger male population across the region.

As a result, it seems that male chauvinism remains a key factor in limiting women's access to the internet.

Closing the digital gender divide

So what can we do to address these issues?

GSMA Intelligence **offers** the following practical guidance for remedying the digital gender gap:

1. Ensure that there is a focus on gender equality and reaching women at an organisational and policy level, with senior leaders championing the issue and setting specific gender equity targets.
2. Understand the mobile gender gap by improving the quality and availability of gender-disaggregated data and understanding women's needs and the barriers they face to mobile ownership and use.
3. Explicitly address women's needs, circumstances, and challenges in the design and implementation of mobile-related products, services, interventions and policies. This includes addressing the barriers that women face related to affordability, knowledge and digital skills, safety and security, and access and availability of relevant content, products and services.
4. Collaborate and partner with different stakeholders to address the mobile gender gap. Targeted intervention is needed from industry, policymakers, the development community and other stakeholders to ensure that women are no longer left behind.

The full report explores each of these recommendations in more detail, and provides significantly more context to achieving more equitable internet access, so I'd strongly encourage you to **download it here**.

Dig deeper

We publish free country reports for almost every nation on Earth, so if you're looking for more data on internet adoption and use at a local level, our **DataReportal library** is a great place to start.

I'd also strongly recommend reading GSMA Intelligence's State of Mobile Internet Connectivity Report 2023, and its Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023, which you can find **here** and **here** (respectively).

Disclosure: Simon Kemp is a brand ambassador for both GWI and data.ai.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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