Use of the Internet and mobile phone ownership among women and men [ITU]

Key points

- Worldwide, the most visible digital divide is the one between women and men, with 58.3% of men and 48.4% of women using the Internet in 2019.
- In regions with a high Internet use penetration, including developed regions and countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, there was only a small difference in Internet usage between women and men (at or below 2%).
- In relative terms, the gender gap among Internet users has grown wider in developing regions, increasing from 15.8% in 2013 to 22.8% in 2019. The largest gap was observed in Central and Southern Asia (51.3%).
- Globally, women are less likely than men to own a mobile phone, with men's ownership being 6.8 percentage points higher than women's, on average.

Background

Globally, digital technologies are transforming ways of living in an unprecedented fashion. Today, the Internet, the most prominent of these digital technologies, is one of the most important tools, if not the most important, in the world. The use of the Internet has a major impact on the economy, helping to raise productivity, enable trade and e-commerce and enhance research and innovation through a more efficient and effective diffusion of ideas.

The social impact of Internet use is equally significant, providing access to a wealth of information, including through social media platforms, and facilitating global communication. The outbreak of the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has made connectivity even more important, with the shifting of work, education, communication and leisure to online forums for those fortunate enough to have access to the Internet.

Current situation

Use of these technologies is uneven: in 2019, 3.6 billion people, almost half of the world population, did not have access to the Internet.[1] There is a clear digital divide between developed regions, where 86.6% of the population is using the Internet, and developing regions, which have an overall share of 47% in Internet usage. In the least developed countries, only 19.1% of the population is using the Internet.

The most visible digital divide is the one between women and men

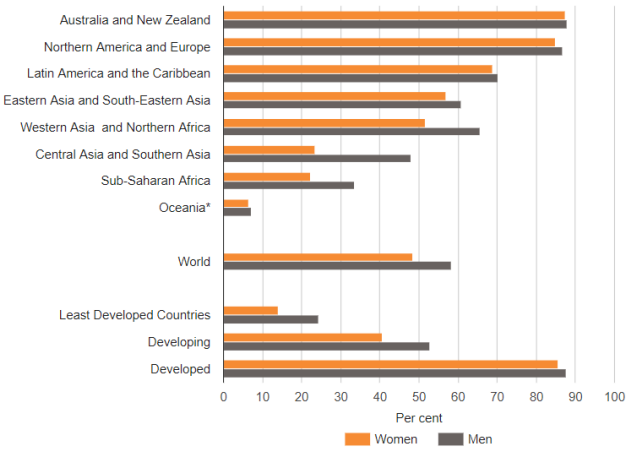
Beyond development status, there are additional digital divides, such as by level of education, skills and geographical location (including urban versus rural), but the most visible is the digital divide by sex. In many places, women have less access to technology and hence use it less than men.

In 2019, 58.3% of men were using the Internet, against only 48.4% of women (see figure I), resulting in a difference of 10 percentage points. In developed countries, there was a small gender gap, with 87.6% of men and 85.6% of women were using the Internet. In developing countries, there was a significant difference between men using the Internet (52.8%) and women (40.7%). Furthermore, the difference in levels of access to the Internet between men (24.4%) and women (13.9%) in the least developed countries was significant.

A similar picture emerges from a regional perspective. In regions with a high Internet use penetration, including Australia and New Zealand, Northern America and Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, there were only small differences in usage between men and women. In other regions, however, the gaps were substantial, with the exception of Oceania (excluding

Australia and New Zealand) where Internet use was low overall.

Figure I: Internet penetration rate worldwide, including by region, least developed countries and developing and developed regions, by sex: 2019 (Percentage)



Note: *excluding Australia and New Zealand

Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU), ITU modelled estimates (correspondence with ITU on 22 June 2020).
Note: Penetration rates in figure I refer to the number of women/men that use the Internet, as a percentage of the respective total female/male population.

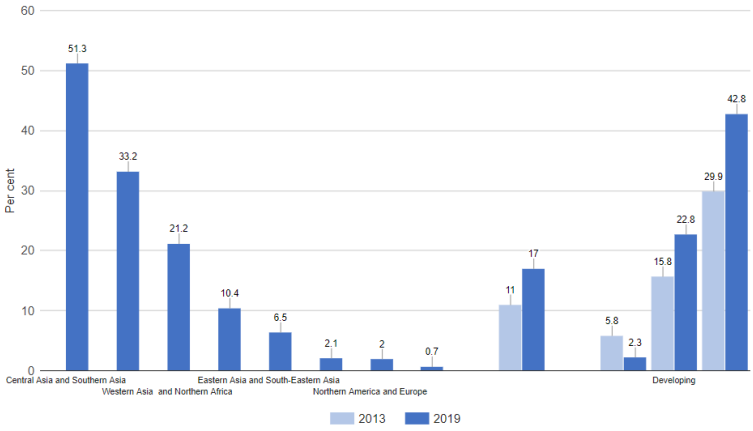
The gender gap among Internet users has grown wider in developing regions

A better way to explore the digital gender divide is to look at the gender gap in relative terms, by dividing the difference in men's and women's Internet use by men's Internet use and multiplying by 100 (see figure II).

The global gender gap among Internet users stood at 17% in 2019, which represented an increase of six percentage points compared with the gap in 2013. The main reason for this increase is a large uptake in use of the Internet by men in developing regions, not matched by an equally large uptake in use by women. In developed regions, the gender gap is disappearing, dropping from 5.8% in 2013 to 2.3% in 2019. In developing regions, on the other hand, the gender gap was estimated to have increased from 15.8% to 22.8%, and in least developed countries from 29.9% to 42.8%.

Data disaggregated at the regional level, available only for 2019, shows that the digital gender gap was markedly high in Central and Southern Asia (51.3%), and substantial in sub-Saharan Africa (33.2%) and Western Asia and Northern Africa (21.2%). As noted above, the gender gap was small in Australia and New Zealand (0.7%), Northern America and Europe (2%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (2.1%).

Figure II: Global gender gap in Internet usage, including by region, least developed countries and developing and developed regions: 2013 and 2019 (Percentage)



Source: ITU, 2020, ITU modelled estimates (correspondence with ITU on 22 June 2020).
Note: The gender gap represents the difference between the Internet user penetration rates for men and women relative to the Internet user penetration rate for men, expressed as a percentage.

Globally, women are less likely than men to own a mobile phone

Ownership of mobile phones is an important tool for reducing gender inequality, and the effect of mobile phone access for women has been shown to accelerate economic and social development. However, globally a gender gap for this indicator is evident.

Among 84 United Nations Member States and territories with latest available sex-disaggregated data for the period 2016—2018, mobile phone ownership among men, on average, was 6.8 percentage points higher than for women (see figure III). In 24 of those countries, more women than men owned a mobile phone, but the gender gap was small; in Chile, however, women's mobile phone ownership was substantially higher than that of men. In 23 of the 84 countries countries with latest available sex-disaggregated data, men's ownership was more than 10 percentage points higher than women's ownership, reaching as high as 53 percentage points in the Niger and 42 percentage points in C�te d'Ivoire. In most of the countries that had a large gender gap in mobile phone ownership, there was also a large gender gap in Internet usage.

About the data

Definitions

- **Proportion of women and men using the Internet**: Provides information on the proportion of women and men who used the Internet from any location in the last three months, measuring the digital divide between women and men.[2]
- **Proportion of women and men who own a mobile telephone**: Provides information on the proportion of women and men owning a mobile cellular phone device with at least one active subscriber identification module (SIM) card for personal use (an active SIM card is one that has been used in the last three months).[3]

Coverage

Women and men in all age groups.

Availability

84 United Nations Member States and territories with latest available sex-disaggregated data for the period 2016—2018 (mobile ownership) and 110 United Nations Member States and territories with latest available sex-disaggregated data (Internet use). Countries and territories are organized by regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.[4]

Footnotes

1. International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019 (last accessed on 3 September 2020).

2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, Global SDG Indicators Database, metadata for Sustainable Development Goals indicators 17.8.1 and 5.b.1.

3. Ibid.

4. UNDESA, Statistics Division, Regional groupings under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators framework.