DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR WOMEN:
Bridging the Gender Tech Gap: Pathways to Digital Inclusion for Women

Digital inclusion refers to equal access and use of digital technologies for all people, regardless of their age, socio-economic background, abilities, and most especially in this case, gender. It is also about ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to fully participate in the digital society and take advantage of its many benefits, discoveries, and opportunities. The premise of digital inclusion is that everyone should be able to make full use of digital technologies and the benefits they bring, while avoiding their potential negative consequences.

The gender tech gap is the difference in access to technology between men and women. It includes gaps in internet access, digital skills, and participation in STEM fields. This gap is driven by various factors, including economic inequalities, limited access to devices, insufficient Internet connectivity, cultural barriers, and a lack of digital skills, among others. For example, according to Africa Renewal, Sub-Saharan African women are 37% less likely than men to use the mobile internet - the largest gender gap globally. This divide creates major barriers for women to fully participate in the digital economy, ultimately limiting their potential as citizens, innovators, and human beings.

Jemima Atieno, a 52-year-old Kenyan hair braider, spent decades building her business in Kenyatta market, Nairobi, only to lose ground to social media after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, as her customers went online to find similar services. (Reuters). She does not know how to access social media, and so she wouldn't have any idea how to market her services, or better them. This reflects a gender divide that has seen Kenyan men reap benefits from the country's online gig economy, while women are left behind, as a result of women's engagement with technology being deprioritized.

Access to the digital space goes beyond being online; it is about ensuring the meaningful participation of all women in the use, design, management, and governance of digital technologies. A feminist perspective reframes access as a domain of power, recognizing the gendered impacts of exclusion and the systemic barriers women face. This perspective also demands an intersectional and holistic understanding of access recognizing the compounded barriers faced by marginalized women. In other words, one that considers how overlapping identities influence women's ability to engage with and shape the digital world.

The Maputo Protocol, article 12, addresses the right to education and training, urging states to eliminate discrimination and promote women's access to education in all disciplines, notably in science and technology. This implies a commitment to facilitating women's engagement with technological fields. Additionally, Section 5 of the Beijing Declaration and Platfrom for Action (1995) calls for increased access to information and communications technology (ICT) for women and girls and emphasizes the need to address the gender gap in technology and ensure equal participation in digital spaces.

One of the African countries implementing these laws is Rwanda, through her SheCanCode Initiative by Stella Girls Inc. It provides training to Rwandan women aged 18-25 with skills to code and build web design, and applications. While attending the cohort participants develop designs for local businesses and create a path way for securing a job. In order to continue offering girls and women an opportunity in a predominantly male field, this initiative believes that we must support their efforts.

Additionally, in Kenya, the National ICT Policy 2020 integrates gender considerations ion tech initiatives. Through the Ajira Digital and GIL (Girls in ICT Learning), women are trained in digital skills to participate in the gig economy. Thus, thousands of women have been upskilled, reducing gender disparities in digital employment.

On the other hand, South Sudan has one of the lowest rates of mobile access and connectivity in the world. Yet, in Bor, mobile access and ownership is high. Mobile ownership is relatively even among men and women, but women have more limited access to the internet and often need family approval to own a smartphone. Several women rely on their husbands to purchase their phones, to replace a lost phone or upgrade an existing phone.

This unfortunate situation is rooted in patriarchal norms and economic dependence, where many women need family approval to own or upgrade a smartphone. This dependence restricts their autonomy, limiting opportunities for education, employment, and civic participation in the digital space. As women remain excluded from these opportunities, the gender tech gap widens, reinforcing societal beliefs that technology is not essential for women.

We advocate for community-based digital literacy programs that target both women and male household decision-makers, emphasizing the social and economic benefits of women's digital inclusion. These programs should incorporate culturally sensitive strategies to challenge patriarchal norms while equipping women with practical tech skills. Additionally, we strongly push for gender-responsive mobile financing initiatives to help women independently purchase and maintain smartphones. Partnering with financial institutions to offer low-interest loans or savings plans for women's digital tools can reduce dependency and foster long-term inclusion.

As Africa strides toward a digital future, can we truly afford to leave half the population behind? What innovations, solutions, and perspectives are we missing when women are excluded from the tech space? Bridging the gender tech gap isn't just about fairness—it's about unlocking the full potential of our societies. The question is: Are we ready to act, or will we continue to let this divide widen?

For Further Reading:

- Gender Analysis in Technical Areas: Digital Inclusion. UN Women

- Horn of Africa: Using digital technologies to advance women, peace and security agenda. From Africa Renewal. By Hannah Teteh.
- Policy Brief. The Digital Gender Gap. By Reiko Kuroda (W20), Mariana Lopez (GSMA), Janelle Sasaki (EY), Michelle Settecase (EY)

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