



DIGA Project Briefing Paper: The Digital Gender Divide

Overview

There can be little disagreement that the internet is rapidly becoming both a centralized form of globalization activities. In addition to being central to economic activity, the internet offers the decentralisation and openness that provide voice and communication that can help development and human rights.

Unequal access to the internet and to gaining digital capabilities is globally referred to as the *Digital Divide*. The gap between those regions and demographics that have access to modern information and communications technology, and those that do not is significant and is growing. The divide is underpinned by socio-economic inequalities that significantly impact both individuals and nations.

Data from UN Women indicates the Digital Divide isn't just about economic access to technology but is also constrained by gender. Worldwide, women are at the forefront of the digital divide. Even where the technology is available, the issue of access is still significant for many women.

Globally, 250 million fewer women are online than men. It is forecasted that the digital gender divide will increase globally to 32% by 2020. This means almost 350 million women and girls would remain unconnected compared to about 290 million men

Factors impacting the gender digital divide include:

- Technology is largely designed by men, for men. In many instances, it is fundamentally not made to meet women's needs (e.g. a potentially lifesaving artificial heart that does not fit a woman's smaller body)
- There is persistent and ingrained sexual stereotyping with regards to digital capabilities, i.e. the claim that women are technophobic or incapable in the maths and sciences
- Cultural constraints including ownership, access, and lack of control over the use of the technology can be additional barriers for women
- Some countries restrict the access of their citizens to the world-wide web

Research identifies socio – economic factors as the primary reasons why fewer women access and use technology. It is a direct result of their unfavourable conditions with respect to employment, education and income which prevents or inhibits their access to digital goods and services.

Studies also show that relationship between the gender divide and digital divide is not straightforward. Women's rate of internet access and use does not automatically rise with national rates of internet penetration. This would appear to reinforce that digital inequalities are more attributable to socially and culturally constructed gender roles than to access or skills alone.

47% of the world's population (3.5 billion people) uses the internet, but this leaves over half (3.9 billion people) the world not yet on line.

In addition, there is a significant gap divide between developing countries and industrialized nations including with regards to gender:



- 81% of the population in developed countries use the Internet, compared with 15% in the least developed countries
- The regional gender gap is largest in Africa, at 23%
- The regional gender gap is smallest in the Americas, at 2%
- [16% fewer](#) women than men in developing countries are online
- Women in low- and middle-income countries are [14% less likely](#) to own a phone

The Digital Gender Divide in Business

Digital technologies can foster gender equality in more organized labour markets and in more advanced settings. But as the world embraces the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) women risk being left behind. The gender divide in both pay and the digital economy could grow in the emerging 4IR as women are less likely to be part of technological areas which directly lead to the creation of new industry and jobs.

Digital technologies can reduce gender gaps in the world of work by making work arrangements more flexible, connecting women to work, and generating new opportunities in online work, e-commerce, and the sharing economy.

In some cases, technology could help women address barriers to employment. IT home-based work might help women in environments where social norms or care responsibilities might traditionally have prevented them from working outside the home. But alongside of this, attention needs to be paid to cultural pressures that could inhibit new ways of working. For example, in rural [South Africa](#) mobile phones increased employment more often among women than among men, but only when women did not have large child care responsibilities.

Currently women across the world are much less likely than men to work in the technology and digital sectors. Only 30% of the 7 million people in Europe who work in these sectors are women. Women are under-represented at all levels in these sectors, but especially so in executive (decision-making) positions.

European projections are that there may be a need for an additional 900,000 skilled ICT workers by 2020. If women's numbers were proportionally increased to address these skills gaps, it is estimated it could boost GDP in the EU by €7-9 Billion per annum.

Some of the gender gap in technology industries can be attributed to women's low participation in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. This is in and of itself a product of early gender-based biases in formal and informal education. Only 29 out of every 1000 female graduates have a computing or related degree, and only 4 go on to work in technical areas.

In the UK, the technology sector has the largest 'like-for-like' gender pay gap across all industries. On average women in the UK's tech industry are paid 16 % less than their male counterparts. It is likely that the lack of women in key executive positions in UK tech companies may influence this continued gender gap.

Over the last few decades in [Germany](#) and the [United States](#) digital technologies in the workplace have contributed to an increase in women in employment . Similar [changes](#) have taken place



in [Brazil, Mexico, and Thailand](#). There is also evidence that this has contributed to reductions in gender wage gaps in some areas.

Overall, increasing the number of women in technology would have an extensive positive impact on the global economy. Tech giant Intel estimates that an additional 600 million women and girls online has the potential to boost global GDP by as much as \$18 billion dollars.

Conclusions

Solutions to addressing the gender digital divide require global approaches that recognise digital infrastructure and digital skills as essential to economic and social development. While increased worldwide infrastructure (access) is part of the solution, access alone does not automatically reduce socio-economic inequalities.

Therefore, gender specific support needs to be built into global access and capability planning.

This could include:

- International governmental adoption of gender sensitive digital policies
- Increased access and education in STEM for girls
- Targeted digital skills training to women in general
- Proactive creation and promotion of women leaders as role models in the digital economy as well as in government and education
- Institutions and companies being required to actively ensure gender equality in hiring practices

The importance of internet accessibility and affordability to developing countries and to women must be fully recognised. Digital technologies can help to create more democratic and transparent economic growth but this will not happen without international cooperation and targeted planned digital development. It is important to recognise that there is a crucial need to break down barriers and stereotypes that prevent women and girls from both fully accessing the internet as well as realising the benefits of full digital inclusion. It is an economic imperative and a necessary step in ensuring equal human rights. Full digital inclusion will help enable the independence and voice that women must have to enable their full potential and rights as world citizens.

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