

## IGF BPF GENDER & ACCESS (2016)

### CONTRIBUTION TO IGF'S POLICY OPTIONS FOR CONNECTING AND ENABLING THE NEXT BILLION(S) - PHASE II

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#### **How would you define, or how do you understand, the theme “Connecting and Enabling the Next Billion” [specifically where women and girls are concerned]?**

In connecting and enabling the next billion(s) Internet users, particular attention needs to be paid to women as data indicate that women are less likely and/or able to benefit from access to the Internet than men, particularly in developing countries. The ITU has argued, for instance, that the gender digital gap may be expanding. Today 12% fewer women than men can benefit from Internet access worldwide; rising to 15% in developing countries and almost 29% in least developed countries (ITU, 2016). As the Alliance for Affordable Internet argues (2016):

*"We cannot achieve universal access without bringing women (half the world's population) online; likewise, women's empowerment through ICTs will not happen without enabling women affordable access to the Internet."*

Further, it is particularly important to keep in mind that the gender gap is wide in different parts of the world due to different reasons. Intel's *Women and the Web* report quantified the gap in 2012 to nearly 45% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 35% in South Asia. In order to connect the next billion, bridging the gender access gap is crucial, and ought to be a key priority for governments, businesses and civil society organisations. GSMA's research on the mobile access gap also identifies a vast disparity in the ability of women and men to use mobile phones, which are fast becoming the first tools to provide connectivity in many parts of the developing world. Connecting the next billion needs to account both for supply side, as well as demand-side barriers to adoption, and policy formulation must account for specific characteristics of vulnerable populations such as women while rolling out connectivity initiatives.

#### **Data shows that the growth of Internet adoption is slowing down in some areas, especially as broadband services extend to more remote, less densely populated areas (facing challenges beyond affordability and availability). What are some of the barriers or limitations preventing [women and girls] who do have Internet access from being enabled or empowered through such connectivity?**

Technological advancement in connectivity has expanded broadband access and mobile penetration in recent years – also for women. But a gender digital gap still persists and is expressed in multiple dimensions.

This begins from unequal access to basic Internet infrastructure; the affordability of connectivity costs and devices; gender disparity in education opportunities, including digital literacy and training not geared towards women's needs; an uneven capacity to use the Internet for their needs and priorities; specific gender-based challenges and barriers, including the availability of relevant content and the censorship of online content related to gender and sexuality; and gender-based harassment and violence, both in physical spaces for accessing the Internet (such as public access points like cybercafes) and in online environments (including online harassment and cyberstalking).

Some of these barriers are explored in greater detail in Intel's Women and the Web report, published in 2012.

### 1. Lack of awareness

Even in societies without overtly restrictive gender expectations, Internet awareness is lower among women than men. People often gain exposure to the Internet at their schools and workplaces. But in many developing countries, fewer girls than boys go to school, and all over the world, fewer women than men participate in the formal labour force.<sup>39</sup> In some communities, gender norms prohibit women's participation in the public sphere—even to the extent of walking in the street.

### 2. Lack of ability/Facility

Of all the women in our survey who do not use the Internet, 37 percent cited discomfort with technology as a reason. Discomfort with technology should not be characterized as an innate "technophobia" among women. Instead, it usually stems from the fact that many women non-users are not exposed to the Internet. The reasons for their lack of exposure are similar to the reasons for the gender awareness gap: less employment outside the home, less formal schooling, and less physical mobility.

Our analysis also found a link between income and the ability to access the Internet. Women non-users with high incomes were less likely than non-users with average incomes to cite the absence of anyone to show them how to use the Internet as a barrier.

### 3. Cultural norms

In some countries, barriers related to cultural and gender norms play a significant role in limiting women's use of the Internet. Stereotypes and preconceptions about women's capabilities with technology also play a role. These norms include –

- Restricting control from women in male-dominated families
- Safety from kidnappers, sexual predators, and traffickers
- Access to pornography and cultural conceptions of immorality surrounding it
- Cybercafé environments with intermingling of men and women
- Preference given to sons instead of daughters in families with scarce resources

The IGF's BPF on Gender & Access will be looking at these and others barriers in detail, and should be referred to for more details regarding the barriers and limitations preventing particularly women and girls who do have Internet access from being enabled or empowered through such connectivity.

### **What does meaningful access mean [for women]?**

Meaningful access for particularly women and girls requires giving women and girls access to an Internet that is not only useful but also meaningful and empowering to them. Gaining access that is also meaningful demands an approach that is located within economic, social, political and cultural contexts. It is both short-sighted and inadequate to respond to this issue by looking at infrastructure or economic issues without examining the interplay of various other factors that act as pre-conditions as well as influencing factors to the extent that women and girls are able to access and use the Internet freely, safely and equally in the full exercise of their rights. This includes taking into consideration the impact of online abuse and gender-based violence as a barrier to access, as well as the creation of enabling environments for the protection of women's rights online in tandem with efforts to connect women to the Internet. Likewise, it is impossible to address online abuse and gender-based violence without also addressing the issue of gender digital disparities.

### **How can connecting and enabling users help to achieve gender equality? (SDG 5)**

While the Internet is helping people to imagine new possibilities and actualize them, women and girls are being left behind across the globe - *women are nearly 25 percent less likely than men to be online*. The numerous existing challenges to accessing the internet are amplified in the case of women. Apart from these, there are also gender-specific hurdles that women face in harnessing the internet's potential. Therefore, since gender is proven to be a contributing factor in hindering internet access globally, any efforts made towards bridging that internet gender gap will help achieve gender equality.

The internet is widely considered to be a gateway to actualizing other rights including civil rights such as freedom of expression and association, as well as social and economic rights. Hence, enabling users on the internet provides some key benefits (both tangible as well as intangible) that women don't profit from within their communities in status quo.

Since in many cultures, women are less financially independent compared to men, using the web to search for and apply for a job boosts women's income and income potential, providing them a platform to gain an equal economic footing. *Across the surveyed countries in the Women and Web Report, nearly half of respondents used the web to search for and apply for a job, and 30 percent had used the Internet to earn additional income.*

Women who are discriminated against in their families and local communities are able to feel and exert greater control over their lives by taking advantage of opportunities for self-improvement. This leads to an increased sense of empowerment for women. *More than 70 percent of Internet users considered the Internet "liberating" and 85 percent said it "provides more freedom."*

Especially for women who lack support structures in their own cultural contexts, connecting with users from different communities provides them with alternative narratives about gender roles, and helps them feel externally validated.

Because women are often silenced for sharing their experiences, the Internet also provides a platform for women and girls to make their voices heard—to express their viewpoints, share their experiences, and engage in global conversations.

## **How can connecting and enabling users help to empower women and girls? (SDG 5)**

In connecting and enabling the next billion(s) Internet users, particular attention needs to be paid to women as data indicate that women are less likely and/or able to benefit from access to the Internet than men, particularly in developing countries. The ITU has argued, for instance, that the gender digital gap may be expanding. Today 12% fewer women than men can benefit from Internet access worldwide; rising to 15% in developing countries and almost 29% in least developed countries (ITU, 2016). As the Alliance for Affordable Internet argues (2016):

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Promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls in line with SDG 5 requires not only that unequal access to infrastructure be addressed, but also that the costs of devices and connectivity be decreased, as affordability affects women more significantly than men; that gender disparities in education opportunities be addressed, including digital literacy; that the creation of content relevant and useful to women be supported; and that gender-based harassment and abuse, both in physical spaces for accessing the Internet (such as public access facilities) and in online environments (including various forms of online harassment) (c.f. IGF BPF on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence 2015).

The Women and the Web report also identifies some of the key benefits of the internet in women empowerment.

"Internet use provides key benefits to women, such as greater confidence, external validation, and expression. Empowerment benefits flow from the fact that the Internet permits information, ideas, and perspectives to travel with greater ease and to and from once isolated areas. Social networking allows women to enlarge their communities and to retain their old ones. Online newspapers, blogs, and associations expose women to other narratives and ideas about gender roles. The Internet also provides a platform for women and girls to make their voices heard—to express their viewpoints, share their experiences, and engage in global conversations.

One of the ways the Internet can empower women is by providing them an opportunity to connect with people outside their communities, which can allow them to see themselves and their lives in new ways. When they encounter people outside their communities on Facebook, their blog, and other social media sites, they start to see that they are not defined by their poverty.

Women who "are really devalued in their local communities" or who "face extreme discrimination in their families" can find encouragement online through conversations with other women, often in

far-flung places. Being connected, heard, and externally validated within a global community provides many women the courage and support they need to become change agents at home

Understanding how the rest of the world works is crucial to contextualizing your own position in it and to reflecting on it critically.

This sense of connection enlarges women's understanding of the possibilities open to them. It can also foster a sense that they can change their current situations."

Further, connecting women to the internet can vastly expand their education and health outcomes. Roslyn Layton and Silvia Elaluf-Calderwood present recent research on the use cases of Free Basics, which illustrates some of the benefits of bringing women online ([http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2757384](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2757384)) One use case is the provision of mobile health (mhealth) services for people suffering with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Another use case is for prenatal care for women in rural and remote areas, helping to reduce the pregnancy-related complications that claim almost 1000 lives of women per day. Both of these suggest that campaigns and civil society organisations are able to touch tens of thousands of lives through the power of the internet, empowering women and girls.