



**WORLD WIDE WEB
FOUNDATION**

ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS ONLINE:

Gaps and Opportunities in
Policy and Research

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The Web Foundation was established in 2009 by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web. Our mission is to establish the open web as a public good and a basic right.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As attention to the issue of the global digital divide has increased, so too has attention to the theme of the growing digital gender divide. It is now widely understood that gender plays a significant role in how people access and use the web; these patterns of access and use are compounded by other demographics, including income, education, age, geography, and other social aspects. As data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), GSMA, and the UN Broadband Commission show, these inequalities in digital access and use frequently mirror inequalities found offline — women are lagging behind in reaping digital dividends just as they are in ‘traditional’ spheres of economic, civic and political empowerment.

Many public, private sector and civil society-led initiatives now exist to address the digital gender gap — from building digital skills for women and girls via training and coding programmes, to projects and policies focused on expanding infrastructure and connectivity opportunities. Monitoring progress on these efforts, however, remains a challenge — particularly with regards to how the multitude of efforts collectively contribute to addressing the various layers of the digital gender gap, including affordable access and meaningful use of the web.

At the Web Foundation, we pride ourselves on having been at the forefront of producing qualitative and quantitative insights on how women access and use the web, and how they leverage it for personal, civic and economic empowerment. In 2015, our [research](#) revealed the true extent of the digital gender divide in low-income, urban communities across Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America; in 2016, members of our [Women’s Rights Online network](#) took forward national digital gender gap audits to assess the policies in place to bridge this divide and advance women’s internet access and use.

As we plan for our next phase of research in 2018, we wanted to first look at the progress made since to research and improve our understanding of the digital gender gap, and to also consider what data we need to monitor progress, and what policy pain points need to be addressed, including addressing affordable, universal, and unconditional access and meaningful use of the web by women and girls. Based on this assessment, we then look at the gaps in — and opportunities for — additional research in the space, and outline a series of questions (guided by our [REACT policy framework](#)) that we plan to use to guide future research. We believe these questions — which are a mix of qualitative and quantitative — will provide a strong methodological framework to support in-depth findings on the progress, challenges and ways forward toward closing the digital gender gap.

This report is the result of these assessments. We hope you find this to be of use, and encourage you to get in touch with your feedback and ideas. We acknowledge that there are a wide range of issues that merit deeper research — topics ranging from rights, education, affordable access, relevant content and government targets — and that can indeed be standalone research areas. Guided by our [REACT](#) policy advocacy framework, we put forward a set of research questions and areas that will guide our next research phase, and that we hope will guide and inform other actors’ research into the digital gender divide. Identifying and implementing a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions to our next research phase, we believe, will provide a strong methodological framework to support in-depth findings on the progress, challenges and ways forward toward closing the digital gender divide.

INTRODUCTION

Internet access offers a powerful avenue for people around the world to assert their rights and to claim social, economic and political opportunities for empowerment. Yet, half the world's population remains offline — most of them women, and most in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). [Recent data](#) from the ITU shows that this persistent, pernicious digital gender divide is worsening — a fact that threatens to deepen existing inequalities and to undermine global development as the benefits of technological change are captured primarily by urban men.

Women's equal access to new technologies and their meaningful participation on and through the web is a critical component of women's rights and equality in a digital world. Access to the internet, in particular, can support women to have a voice in spaces where this was previously denied, challenge gender norms, use information, participate in political and associational networks, and increase their economic independence.



However, the distribution of the benefits of digital technologies remains uneven, with women and the poor less likely to have access to the internet, and less likely to use the web for political and economic empowerment. Furthermore, the guarantee of rights associated with digital access is wholly absent in most countries around the world. This is evidenced by growing intrusions on privacy, risks to freedom of expression, and the epidemic of online harassment — all of which threaten the opportunities for the web to advance women's rights and human rights overall. The responsibility to secure and protect citizens rights in digital spaces has, in many cases, been relegated to private companies' terms of service and proprietary algorithms. In this context, decision-making powers are not publicly transparent, leaving private companies largely unaccountable to women's concerns.

Recent years have seen new commitments and acknowledgement of the significance of ICTs for women. Notably, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) provide an historic opportunity to halt and reverse growing digital inequality by turning political commitments into concrete interventions. With respect to digital equality, the SDGs commit UN member states to:

- Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology (ICT), to promote the empowerment of women (SDG 5b)
- Achieve universal, affordable internet access in least developed countries by 2020 (SDG 9c) and
- Ensure equal access to basic services [and] appropriate new technology for all women and men by 2030 (SDG 1.4)

The need for digital equality has been acknowledged by the [Commission on the Status of Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (particularly [Section J](#), which addresses women and the media), the UN Secretary General's [High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment](#) (2016-17), and [UN Women's flagship report](#) on monitoring gender equality in the 2030 Agenda. Additional political commitments to closing the digital gender divide have been reiterated by leaders throughout the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the [Broadband Commission Working Group on Gender](#), and [EQUALS](#) — a global network of public and private partners working to bridge the digital gender divide.

01

ASSESSING THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE:

A Policy, Access And Data Problem

Access and use of ICTs

Our 2015 Women's Rights Online (WRO) research found that gender continues to be a significant factor determining internet access, controlling for age, education and income. In urban poor communities across the Global South, women are 50% less likely to be connected than men in the same communities.

Nationally representative studies of the ICT gender gap across the Global South conducted by [Research ICT Africa and University of Cape Town](#), LIRNEasia, and others, also show that income and education are primary factors contributing to and compounding the ICT gender gap. As they have noted, "It is not women's access to ICTs that needs to be the sole focus of policy interventions, but the income and education gap that persists between genders. Thus, by targeting income and education inequality, one is effectively targeting the digital divide."¹

The digital gender gap extends beyond just divisions in access — as Table 1 below indicates, women and those living in poverty in the Global South are also less likely to use the internet to transform their lives; even once online, women are less likely to use ICTs to increase economic opportunity, seek information or participate in civic life, even in urban areas where connectivity is more widely available.

For instance, while 98% of connected women in New Delhi, India reported using Facebook, just 17% had sought out information on their rights; just 4% had used the web to find a job or increase their income, and only 1% reported finding new networks online ([Web Foundation/IT For Change 2015](#)).

The digital gender gap means that women are cut off from important information and opportunities, and are also less able to participate fully in public and civic life. Governments must put comprehensive strategies in place as well as exercise policy reforms and commitments now to ensure that the fast-rising tide of technology and its use does not leave women behind by denying them the right to participate as equal citizens.

¹ Research ICT Africa and University of Cape Town, *Lifting the Veil on Gender in Africa*.

Table 1: Basic Facts and Figures from Sample Cities²

CITIES	INTERNET USERS, % (ITU/ NATIONAL STATISTICS)	FEMALE INTERNET USERS, % (ITU/ NATIONAL STATISTICS)	MALE INTERNET USERS, % (ITU/ NATIONAL STATISTICS)	1GB PREPAID MOBILE DATA, % OF GNI PC (A4AI, 2016)	% OF WOMEN INTERNET USERS WHO REPORT ECONOMIC GAIN, (WRO, URBAN AREAS)	% OF WOMEN INTERNET USERS VOICING OPINIONS ONLINE (WRO, URBAN AREAS)	NATIONAL BROADBAND PLAN EXISTS?	BROADBAND PLAN HAS GENDER TARGETS
CAMEROON (YAOUNDE)	25	No official data	No official data	6.43%	31 (Yaounde)	31 (Yaounde)	Yes	No
COLOMBIA (BOGOTA)	58.14	58.2	58.1	2.11%	21 (Bogota)	21 (Bogota)	Yes	Yes
EGYPT (CAIRO)	41.25	38.2	44.2	1.19%	21 (Cairo)	7 (Cairo)	Yes	No
GHANA (ACCRA)	34.67	9	19	4.11%	n/a	n/a	Yes	No
INDIA (NEW DELHI)	29.55	17	27	2.69%	24 (New Delhi)	8 (New Delhi)	Yes	No
INDONESIA (JAKARTA)	25.37	23.5	27.2	1.45%	42 (Jakarta)	5 (Jakarta)	Yes	No
KENYA (NAIROBI)	26	21	30	4.33%	28 (Nairobi)	36 (Nairobi)	Yes	No
MOZAMBIQUE (MAPUTO)	17.52	No official data	No official data	6.85%	43 (Maputo)	41 (Maputo)	Yes	No
NIGERIA (LAGOS)	25.67	No official data	No official data	1.57%	25 (Lagos)	40 (Lagos)	Yes	Yes
PHILIPPINES (MANILA)	55.50	No official data	No official data	2.02%	24 (Manila)	8 (Manila)	Yes	No
UGANDA (KAMPALA)	21.88	6	7.2	15.33%	26 (Kampala)	54 (Kampala)	No (in progress)	No

Note on Table 1: We used national data where available (from ITU or other national surveys) to calculate the gender gap. Where no national sex-disaggregated statistics are available on internet users, we calculated the gender gap based on data collected in our WRO research surveys (2015) which focused on urban poor areas. WRO data is not nationally representative. Rather, it provides an indication of internet access and use in urban poor areas in a select city.

² Identified based on those countries included in Web Foundation's Women's Rights Online survey research

Where data on men's and women's internet access exists, there are different options available to calculate the gap — and not all organisations use the same one. This lack of a standard of measurement means that different organisations put forward different estimates that are all too often are used interchangeably by policymakers and others.

At the Web Foundation, we calculate the gender gap as the difference between the internet penetration rate between men and women, as a proportion of internet penetration rate for women:

% of women using the internet - % of men using the internet

% of women using the internet

Different methodologies and research design may deliver different conclusions and implications for policy. It is, therefore, important to situate research findings in the context of the specific methodology. For example, in our WRO survey in Maputo, Mozambique, we found that 33% of women compared to 59% of men have access to the internet. This stands in contrast to data from the ITU which indicates that just 18% of the total population has internet access. The large difference between WRO data on internet users in Maputo and ITU data on internet penetration in Mozambique is due to the fact that 68% of Mozambique's population is rural. Our survey took place in Maputo which accounts for less than 6% of the total population of Mozambique.

Similar trends emerge when looking at our WRO survey in New Delhi and Manila. In New Delhi and Manila, the seeming absence of a gender gap, as indicated in the WRO survey results, is due to the focus on specific urban poor areas. Results change drastically when analysis is done at the national level. In this case the WRO data is not representative of India or the Philippines, but it is representative of the specific areas sampled within the city. The design and analysis of research data has important implications for policy, and should therefore be done as a consultative and participatory process with country experts and stakeholders.

“Aggregate data collection masks gender differences, which implies that women's realities remain unrecorded and are ignored, not only in statistics but also in policy”

Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, an international, multi-stakeholder initiative launched to improve the availability and quality of ICT data and indicators, particularly in developing countries

Policy and Governance

Global, regional and national ICT governance and policy frameworks can provide the grounds to support full participation in the digital age. Yet, failure to create and implement good policies inhibits access to technology, information, and knowledge — particularly for women and the poor. Representation of gender and women's rights issues in policy-making spaces is, therefore, important to create the right policies that will enable women to benefit fully and equally from digital society. It is important to integrate gender into policy without it being a side note or afterthought, as is often the case.

Another challenge is that the responsibility to secure digital rights is oftentimes relegated to companies, in the void of sound legal frameworks to protect the online rights and privacy of individuals. The fact that there is little urgency to develop the comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks needed to guarantee women's rights online is worrying — particularly in our increasingly data-driven and data-heavy society.

Better broadband policies offer a clear path to improving women's internet access and use, and to moving forward toward universal access goals. However, [our recent research of 58 low- and middle-income countries' national broadband policies](#) indicates that only a handful of governments have taken any action at the policy level to advance true progress toward closing the digital gender gap. Without a specific focus on improving opportunities for internet access and use for women, policies will continue to exclude half the population.

ICT policies can and must address growing digital gender inequality in order for women to participate and be heard in the digital revolution; yet, a majority of countries' ICT strategies and policies remain gender-blind. Of the ten countries reviewed in the first phase of our [Digital Gender Gap Audit](#) (2016), only four (Colombia, Nigeria, India, and Ghana) have national or sub-national policies to encourage increased access, training, and use of the web by women and girls. But in many of these cases ([as in other countries reviewed](#)), no official, concrete gender targets exist. A 2017 [report](#) by the Web Foundation and Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) found that a vast majority of National Broadband Plans fail to include gender targets. **Gender-responsive broadband planning is not just about making policy for women; rather, it is policy that ensures that all groups have equal opportunities to access and make use of broadband services.**

Governments should carry out gender audits to inform their implementation of gender-responsive ICT policies. In many countries, women's organisations have made significant contributions to incorporating gender perspectives in policy across various sectors, such as health, education, and the environment. The same should be done with ICT and telecommunications policy.

Data

Despite the opportunities that exist for implementing policies to support women's rights on and through the web, there is very little statistically relevant data on women and ICTs. This makes it nearly impossible for governments and their partners in civil society to track progress on the impact of policies and initiatives in closing the digital gender divide. In addition, none of the major gender equality indices incorporate ICTs. When ICT data excludes data on women specifically, women's social realities become ignored in data and in policy ([Hafkin 2002, Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development 2014](#)). Currently, only [69 countries](#) submit gender-disaggregated data on internet access to the ITU (the UN agency responsible for tracking this indicator). The ITU has no gender-disaggregated data on other important ICT indicators, such as digital skills.

SDG 17 — which calls on the global community to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development — commits governments to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely, and reliable gender-disaggregated data. Technology has an [increasingly vital role in achieving all SDG targets](#), facilitating access to information and public participation. As the importance of access to and use of ICTs grows, so too does the need — and urgency — to collect gender-disaggregated data on whether and how women are accessing and using these technologies. Without this data, measuring and achieving meaningful progress will remain impossible.

Despite the opportunities that exist for digital policies and tools to support women's empowerment, few countries collect data on women and ICTs, and none of the major ICT or gender equality indices incorporate ICTs beyond access indicators. In their [mapping of the availability of gender data](#) across key indicators, including access to mobile phones and the internet, Data 2X found comprehensive gaps and limitations, including: limited coverage across countries, limited international standards to allow for comparability, limited complexity of information and limited granularity in disaggregation of datasets. **Closing the gender gap in ICT data is integral to successful gender-responsive ICT policymaking.** The ITU Broadband Commission Working Group on Gender has called on countries to integrate gender into national ICT/broadband policies, and to initiate action plans to achieve gender equality in access to the internet (2017). The regular collection and analysis of data on gender and ICT is a vital prerequisite to achieve this.

THE REACT FRAMEWORK

Creating a more accessible and empowering internet for women requires policy that focuses on a number of key areas, easily remembered as R.E.A.C.T.: Rights, Education, Access, Content, and Targets. These should be considered in all aspects of ICT policy.

We propose the following shared policy priorities for governments to REACT to close the digital gender divide.

R = Rights

- Strengthen legal protection of the online rights and privacy of women and men, including through stronger data protection laws.
- Ensure that women and girls are able to take legal action against perpetrators of online violence, and that police and judiciary have training and resources to pursue such cases.
- Invest in large-scale, ongoing national awareness campaigns to stamp out online gender violence and educate users on their rights, privacy, and security.

E = Education

- Integrate basic digital literacy in school curricula at all levels — from primary to tertiary — and ensure that teachers are qualified and supported to teach it.
- Ensure digital literacy goes beyond technical skills to support the ability of women and girls to participate in society and make life choices.
- Support female micro-entrepreneurs to gain digital capabilities.

A = Access

- Prioritise policy reforms to cut the prohibitive cost of connecting. Work towards the Alliance for Affordable Internet's ['1 for 2' affordability target](#): 1GB of prepaid mobile data costing no more than 2% of average per capita monthly income.
- Expand free internet access in public places, including all schools, clinics, job centres, and community centres.
- Improve infrastructure and support the development of innovative last mile-connectivity models, including by women's collectives and organisations.
- Consider access measures specifically targeting women, such as a free basic data allowance for women.

C = Content

- Expand availability of government services and data online, as well as channels for citizens to engage leaders and officials through ICTs.
- Prioritise wide online availability of user-friendly, local-language information, services and products that empower women and enhance their livelihoods. This includes ensuring that women have the agency to create and contribute to local and relevant content.
- Audit all government websites to assess the relevance of their content for women, and their effectiveness in supporting women to access information.

T = Targets

- Incorporate concrete gender equity targets, backed by adequate budget allocations, into national ICT policies and/or broadband plans.
- Monitor gender equality in the implementation of ICT strategies by collecting data disaggregated by gender, income, and location.
- Develop quantitative and qualitative indicators that measure public ICT initiatives and their impact on women.

02

GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We believe that the next few years will provide a critical window for governments and their partners in civil society and the private sector to reverse digital inequality, including closing the digital gender gap. Internet access is a critical determinant of individuals' human and social capital and earning power. Ignoring the ICT gender gap now will further entrench inequalities. Progress toward reversing inequality is likely to be painfully slow, with significant economic and social costs. In order to reverse this trend, governments need to adopt [gender-responsive broadband planning](#) and to ensure that all government line ministries take a gender-responsive approach to their policy and planning.

The role of research in providing a better understanding of the gendered differences in ICT access and use is paramount. Based on the aforementioned REACT policy advocacy framework and our recent collaboration with GSMA and APC on a [toolkit for researching women's internet access and use](#), we therefore propose [a set of research questions](#), informed by our 2015 research, as well as new areas that require further investigation. These questions will draw out multiple perspectives that can inform how governments, the private sector, and civil society can draw from common baselines in designing interventions to close the gender gap in affordable access and meaningful use of the internet.

03

LOOKING FORWARD

As we plan future work and research, we will aim to move beyond an understanding of the digital gender divide that is based solely in statistics and percentages — there are different methodologies and approaches behind these numbers, and they do not tell the full story of the issue, nor how to fix it. Instead, we will focus on the primary contributors to the digital gender gap and how best to address them. For example, in the next phase of WRO research, we want to focus on how we can draw in better links between broadband targets and the gender gap, especially for countries that are incorporating/committed to clear targets. The research will draw on insights that are not just quantitative; the digital gender divide isn't simply numerical, and therefore insights and conclusions around it should aim to dive deeper, beyond the numbers. How do we build on the REACT framework, for example, to tackle education inequality and to enrich the work on this issue? As opposed to competing with others on the best calculations available, how do we reach a better nuanced recommendation as to how the digital gender divide can be addressed?

Moreover, as great as survey tools are, participant observation is also really powerful. Our partners are well placed to offer such observations thanks to their own collaborations (e.g., workshops and trainings with partners across countries), taking a nuanced approach to research and analysis. Partners might be able to provide case studies of specific individuals in specific contexts — for example: “This is how a woman in the south of the Philippines experiences the web and the digital gender gap in her specific context” — and understanding why this is a big issue.

Our next research phase will be broadly guided by this approach. Additionally, we invite others to reflect upon and contribute to this thinking — especially if there are additional themes to consider — with the ultimate goal of further unpacking the digital gender divide through research. We would like to hear from you and your thoughts on our approach for the new research phase in the WRO programme. Please share your feedback via:

- **Email:** nanjira.sambuli@webfoundation.org
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- **Twitter:** #WomensRightsOnline

04

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND AND QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

A note on gender and the non-binary

Our focus in this program is women and, as a result, we do not currently explore beyond the binary. This, however, does not discount the non-binary spectrum of gender identities. It is also deeply nuanced in contexts within which we work. (e.g., 2015 WRO survey included 'other' in the demographic gender questions, but no participant identified as such, perhaps because of the context in which the survey took place, the framing of the research, and/or because in some areas, explicitly naming non-binary options could even lead to hostilities or risks to participants.

Even with a focus on the gender binary, it is not at the expense or overlooking of the non-binary, but rather to find avenues to open up political and institutional acknowledgement of the marginalised. We do, however, acknowledge this as a limitation of this work. Moreover, gender (even in binary terms) is viewed in this research as a separate issue from other categories designed to hold women back, such as race. We welcome views to incorporate the non-binary, mindful of contexts within which we work.

We believe that the mainstreaming of gender in ICT policy-making has a positive effect for all people of all genders. Fundamentally, our work aims for gender-responsive policies that empower everyone to strive and thrive online. While much of our language and work centers on women's experiences, we welcome policy change that supports an open web for everyone.

About the Web Foundation and the Women's Rights Online Network

In 2014, the [Web Foundation](#) set up the [Women's Rights Online \(WRO\) research and advocacy network](#), which is working to create an evidence-base to push for digital policy reform. The WRO network currently comprises women's rights and digital rights groups across 15 countries across Africa, South East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. These groups are all working locally and regionally to bridge the gender gap in technology, data, and policy making. The Web Foundation coordinates the network, conducts research in collaboration with partners, develops research methodologies and advocacy frameworks that are collectively used to demand digital equality and internet policy reform to enable a world where everyone can access the web and use it to improve their lives.

Based on the network's research in 2015, the Web Foundation's [Women's Rights Online \(WRO\)](#) initiative found that extreme gender inequalities in online freedom and participation exist across urban poor areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America where women are 50% less likely than men to be online, and 30-50% less likely to use the internet for economic and political empowerment. This gender gap in connectivity means that hundreds of millions of women and girls are denied access to online education, health services, economic opportunity, political voice, and many more services and opportunities .

Furthermore, the internet's role as a safe space for expression and innovation is being undermined by an epidemic of harassment and violence against women once they get online, as well as growing intrusions on internet users' right to privacy and data protection. Our research shows that seven in ten young women (18-24) who use the internet daily have experienced online harassment. It was precisely across this age group that we found the greatest potential for women to leverage ICTs for empowerment.

If these trends do not change, the spread of ICTs could ultimately reinforce offline patterns of inequality rather than becoming a tool to achieve digital equality. Based on our research and advocacy work through the network, we developed a five point advocacy framework, dubbed REACT - Rights, Education, Access, Content, Targets. The [REACT framework](#) has proven to be a useful guide to assess Internet freedom for women and girls and to provide guidance for policy makers interested in addressing women and girls' digital rights and freedoms, digital skills and education, affordable and meaningful internet access, relevant content and services, as well as concrete and gender-equitable ICT policy targets.

Our Women's Rights Online network is working to reverse this trend by focusing its efforts on impacting the policies needed to bridge the gender gap in technology, data, and policy making. In 2015 we carried out [household survey research](#) in urban poor areas of ten countries to assess the gender gap in digital empowerment. We followed this up in 2016 with [Digital Gender Gap Audits](#), which assess policy commitments and actions towards closing the digital gender gap. [In 2017, we supported Women's Rights Online partners to](#) present this research to policymakers and work with governments to integrate our recommendations for closing the digital gender gap into policy. We built coalitions with women in government and leadership roles, women's organisations, community activists and journalists to charter a course of action, while ensuring members of these coalitions have the knowledge and skills to use the internet to enhance their voices while staying safe online. We supported new research unpacking responses to online gender based violence and women's rights on and through the internet and presented recommendations at key forums.



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