MAY 2019

Beyond Technology

*The Fourth Industrial Revolution
in the Developing World*

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CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

A Report of the
CSIS PROJECT ON PROSPERITY AND DEVELOPMENT

4 | Is Universal, Affordable Internet Just an Ambitious Goal? Overcoming the Digital Gender Gap

By Sonia Jorge and Maiko Nakagaki

The internet is one of the most important mediums of modern communication. We use the internet to connect with friends, to obtain information, to conduct business, to access products and services, and to engage politically and with our local communities. The 193 member states of the United Nations recognize the important role internet plays in today's digital world for social and economic development and have agreed to work toward achieving universal, affordable internet access by 2020 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Although this inclusion in the SDGs represents a significant step, the reality is that most countries have failed to implement clear plans or policies to achieve the universal access goals. Today, more than half the world is still offline.[1] The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) conducts research across 61 low- and middle-income countries to produce an annual report on affordability. According to A4AI's 2017 report, only 44 percent of the countries studied have public access policies that are backed by financial support for implementation. National broadband plans are necessary to achieve universal access yet in 41 percent of countries they have never been developed or are badly outdated.[2] Many countries lack concrete, time-bound targets for developing their Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sectors.[3] This failure to prioritize broadband development for all is resulting in a dramatic slowdown in the number of people coming

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1. Eleanor Sarpong, "Half of the world's people are still offline. How do we connect them as quickly as possible," Web Foundation, February 5, 2019, https://webfoundation.org/2019/02/half-of-the-worlds-people-are-still-of-fline-how-do-we-connect-them-as-quickly-as-possible/.
2. Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), *2017 Affordability Report, Executive Summary*, https://a4ai.org/affordabil-ity-report/report/2017/.
3. Ibid.

online.[4] In fact, at the current rate of internet growth and adoption, universal affordable internet will not be achieved until 2043.[5]

Any policy or project aimed to get more people online will fail unless the gender gap is addressed by all actors. Although we may think of this as a task for only policymakers and governments, it also should concern companies that want to reach new consumers and markets and civil society organizations that want to ensure that everyone can use the internet to participate in civic and political life.

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Of the nearly four billion people still offline today, most are women.[6] Around the world, women face barriers to internet access, including inability to afford to connect, limited digital skills, and social and cultural barriers to using the web. Access to the internet is power, yet more than two billion women and girls are silenced, unable to access key resources, information, and opportunities that come with an internet connection.[7] Poor internet access can prevent women from socially, economically and politically engaging in even the most developed economies—restricting their communications, education, employment opportunities, civic participation, and accessing or managing finances. In turn, this prevents them from empowering themselves and contributing to their communities or families. This gender gap also directly correlates to democratic and human rights for women and girls. As outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, denying women and girls their freedom of expression, assembly, and association online goes against their rights as individuals.[8] More than ever, gender disparities in internet access and use are further marginalizing women and ultimately will undermine efforts and goals to foster a more gender-equitable world.

Closing the Digital Gender Gap

The digital divide falls along gender and income lines. Women are among the hardest hit by the high connection cost because women in the bottom of the income pyramid earn 30–50 percent less than their male counterparts, making internet access prices prohibitive.[9] Although international efforts to promote a gendered approach to ICT are increasing, there is more lip service than action: overall, policymakers across the globe are failing to take the necessary concrete steps for action. For example, A4AI's research

4. Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), *2018 Affordability Report*, https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2018/.

5. Web Foundation, *The Case #ForTheWeb* (Washington, D.C.: Web Foundation, 2018) http://webfoundation.org/docs/2018/11/The-Case-For-The-Web-Report.pdf.

6. Emma Luxton, "4 billion people still don't have internet access. Here's how to connect them," World Economic Forum, May 11, 2016, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/4-billion-people-still-don-t-have-internet-access-here-s-how-to-connect-them/.

7. International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society Report 2017, Volume 1* (Geneva: International Telecommunication Union, 2017) , https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2017.aspx.

8. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.

9. Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), *2015-2016 Affordability Report*, https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2015/#gender_inequality:_exacerbating_affordability_challenges, 32.

of 58 low- and middle-income countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia revealed that fewer than 9 percent of countries have gender-responsive policies in place.[10] This means that only 5 of the 58 surveyed countries had developed gender-specific targets for internet access and digital skills training, with adequate budgets for policy implementation.[11]

Gaps must be closed by reducing the cost of internet access, which requires reducing overall cost structures while improving the internet infrastructure and ecosystem. Other gender-based challenges to coming online need to be confronted as well, from digital skills and overall education levels to social and cultural norms preventing women from exercising their rights. The unique barriers to connectivity faced by women and girls should be analyzed and gender-responsive steps to improve internet access should be developed. This effort could include designing broadband policies with women in mind by engaging gender advocates and experts in policy discussions and ensuring that gender-disaggregated analyses are integrated in policy developments and plans.[12]

Some global actors are leading the way. Through the GSMA's Connected Women Commitment Initiative, international mobile operators are attempting to close the gender gap in mobile internet by offering cost-efficient mobile plans and promoting safe web usage.[13] On the research and advocacy side, Data2X, a global multi-stakeholder alliance within the UN Foundation, is spearheading the gender data movement to highlight the lack of gendered data worldwide. In their mapping of the availability of gender data across key indicators, including access to mobile phones and the internet, Data2X 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.[14]

The Web Foundation is similarly promoting a women-centered approach to measuring the digital divide — calculating the gap as the difference between the internet penetration rate between men and women, as a proportion of internet penetration rate for women — so that policymakers can set a more ambitious, yet impactful, target for improving access and use for all through their policy goals.[15]

Some governments also are effectively implementing gender-responsive ICT policies. Costa Rica's Fondo Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (the country's Universal Service and Access Fund) administers a program that subsidizes low-income households to purchase

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10. Dhanaraj Thakur et al., Reach with Gender-Responsive ICT Policy (World Wide Web Foundation and Alliance for Affordable Internet), http://webfoundation.org/docs/2017/09/REACT-with-Gender-Responsive-ICT-Policy.pdf.
11. Ibid.
12. Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), *2015-2016 Affordability Report*.
13. See GSMA Connected Women Commitment Initiative, https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/connected-women/the-commitment/.
14. Mayra Buvinic, Rebecca Furst-Nichols, and Gayatri Koolwal, *Mapping Gender Data Gaps*, (Data2x, 2014), https://www.data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Data2X_MappingGenderDataGaps_FullReport.pdf.; "Gender Data Gaps Table," Data2x, https://www.data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Data2X-Gender-Data-Gaps-Table.pdf.
15. "Measuring the digital divide: Why we should be using a women-centered analysis," Web Foundation, May 22, 2018, https://webfoundation.org/2018/05/measuring-the-digital-divide-why-we-should-be-using-a-women-centered-analysis/.

fixed internet service and a computer. Approximately 95 percent of the households qualifying for a subsidy under this program are headed by women. As a result, the initiative has been recognized internationally for supporting access for women and low-income groups.[16]

At the local and national levels, organizations such as those that make up the Web Foundation's Women's Rights Online (WRO) network are working to change the face of the digital divide. For example, the International Association of Women in Radio and Television in Kenya strategically convened forums with ICT and ministerial policy leaders to examine national launches of country digital gender divide audits and to deliberate policy actions by their governments.[17] WRO partners in Colombia, Cameroon, Ghana, and the Philippines held multiple consultations and dialogues with women's rights groups to get their input on national ICT and broadband strategies and subsequently shared their demands with ministries.[18]

Such aforementioned activities are laudable. Yet global stakeholders — civil society groups, governments, private sector, and multilateral organizations —must do more to challenge the status quo to enable affordable, quality connections for all.

Looking Forward: What's Next?

There are three steps that stakeholders can take to move towards digital inclusivity for all.

First, we must address the affordability barrier and drive down costs through good policymaking. Technology is not gender neutral, nor are the policies that guide its development and use. Policies must be developed with measures to keep the long-term benefits of promoting wider and targeted availability of—and access to—the internet for all, especially for today's unconnected populations. These long-term approaches will encourage and support job growth, spur greater innovation through a diversified ICT sector, and will ultimately contribute to economic growth.

> *Technology is not gender neutral, nor are the policies that guide its development and use.*

Investing in public access and digital skills education are good policy examples. Women are more likely to use public Wi-Fi spots because of gender wage gaps and the inability to pay for regular internet use. Public access solutions, such as low-cost connection for schools, public WiFi, and increased unlicensed spectrum options—to provide low-cost or free broadband in rural and remote areas—are critical to reach women.[19] Likewise, investment in digital skills education is important so that individuals can navigate the web more meaningfully once they have access and participate in the digital economy.

16. Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), *2015–2016 Affordability Report*, 10.
17. John Walubengo, "Government ICT policy must address gender gaps," Daily Nation, March 7, 2017. https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/blogs/dot9/walubengo/2274560-3840232-77gbum/index.html.
18. "How the Women's Rights Online network is tackling the digital gender gap in 2017," Web Foundation, April 10, 2017, https://webfoundation.org/2017/04/how-the-womens-rights-online-network-is-tackling-the-digital-gender-gap-in-2017/.
19. Alliance for Affordable Internet(A4AI), *The Impacts of Emerging Mobile Data Services in Developing Countries*, (Washington, D.C.: 2016), 10. http://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MeasuringImpactsofMobileDataServices_ResearchBrief2.pdf.

Digital skills are especially key for women and girls so that they have the agency to exercise their full rights and freedoms flexibly as active citizens once online.

Second, we must prioritize gender equality in our investments. Many countries have established sector development funds dedicated to expanding connectivity opportunities to unserved and underserved communities. Universal Service and Access Funds (USAFs) —which typically are financed through mandatory contributions by mobile network operators and other telecommunications providers —have tremendous potential for closing the digital divide.

However, research from A4AI and the Web Foundation shows that an estimated $408 million are sitting unused in Africa in Universal Service and Access Funds (USAF).[20] Only 3 of the 37 nations with USAFs have policies that explicitly aim to connect women and girls.[21] If fully utilized, USAFs in those countries could bring 6 million women online and could be used to provide digital skills training to nearly 16 million women and girls. Governments need to set up USAFs, to commit to investing these funds, and to have gender-responsive projects that specifically expand women and girls' internet access and use. Private sector and civil society leaders must work with governments to design policy frameworks that incentivize investment and put available resources where they are needed most.

Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) should also increase their investments in ICT projects that specifically target the last-mile users, including women. Between 2012 and 2016, MDBs committed a cumulative of $525 billion to fund development projects in low-to middle-income countries worldwide. Yet, since 2012, only 1 percent of that funding has gone toward ICT sector projects — despite increasing global recognition of ICTs and wider digital access as critical to the realization of the SDGs. Moreover, nearly zero resources were dedicated in 2016 to supporting ICT regulation and policy projects.[22] Now, more than ever, is a critical time for MDBs to refocus their investment strategies and commit to supporting ICT development, and especially gender-responsive ICT projects, to bring billions online.

Third, we must pay attention to cultural and social gender norms. Addressing technological barriers is imperative, but social and cultural norms also hinder women and girls from accessing the internet. Women may not use technology in the household out of fear for safety and harassment, or simply because families may not be comfortable with it. These social and cultural norms often prevent wives, sisters, and daughters from using the internet.[23] To achieve full digital inclusion all stakeholders should engage social scientists or user-centered design to understand the local cultural and social norms and limitations of technological use by women and girls. Such insights should be used to design locally

20. "Why is US$400 million of funding to expand internet access sitting dormant?," Web Foundation, March 19, 2018, https://webfoundation.org/2018/03/why-is-us400-million-of-funding-to-expand-internet-access-sitting-dormant/.
21. Dhanaraj Thakur and Lauran Potter, *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide* (Washington, DC: A4AI, Web Foundation, and UN Women, 2018), 3,9, https://webfoundation.org/docs/2018/03/Using-USAFs-to-Close-the-Gender-Digital-Divide-in-Africa.pdf.
22. Guy Zibi and the World Wide Web Foundation, *Closing the Investment Gap: How Multilateral Development Banks Can Contribute to Digital Inclusion* (Washington, DC: A4AI, Web Foundation, and Xalam Digital Analytics 2018), 5-6, http://a4ai.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MDB-Investments-in-the-ICT-Sector.pdf
23. Shireen Santosham and , Dominica Lindsey, *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries. GSMA, Altai Consulting* (London: 2015), 40-42, https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Connected-Women-Gender-Gap.pdf.

appropriate programs and policy solutions that are socially and culturally sensitive, yet also strive to increase gender equality.

Conclusion

What can we do to help achieve universal, affordable internet access? A4AI and the Web Foundation believe that if policymakers focus on REACT (rights, education, affordable access, content, and targets) to close the gender digital divide, rapid progress is possible.[24] This will also help to ensure that gender-responsive ICT policy becomes the norm, not the exception.

In the end, it is up to us to ensure that the digital revolution empowers us all, especially currently underserved women and girls. We know the policy steps needed to move the needle forward, and we need to start making the necessary efforts toward digital inclusion and to create an environment where everyone has equal access and the opportunity to use the internet meaningfully. Let us make the vision of digital inclusion and equality a reality for all.

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24. Read more about gender-responsive policy frameworks to achieve gender equality in the *REACT with Gender Responsive ICT Policy*.