

The Costs of Exclusion

South Asia Regional Report

Executive Summary

This report closes a three-part series on the economic consequences of the digital gender gap, the *Costs of Exclusion*. From this series, we have discovered that the costs are not just personal or economic – women’s exclusion has financial and societal implications for us all that should compel governments, businesses, or other stakeholders to act.

Our initial report estimated that 32 low- and lower-middle-income countries have lost out on roughly US\$1 trillion in GDP over the past decade ([A4AI, 2021](#)). This inequality is most stark in sub-Saharan Africa, partially profiled in our second report ([A4AI, 2022](#)), and in South Asia ([GSMA, 2021](#)), now the subject of this report, to call policymakers in these two regions to action.

Fundamentally, policymakers need to know that:

- 1 The digital divide is real – and it’s sexist.**
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- 2 Closing the digital gender gap is good economic policy.**
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- 3 Women already are achieving extraordinary things online: it simply happens too infrequently than it should.**
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- 4 Instructive policy examples and sectoral initiatives exist across the globe on how governments can narrow the divide.**
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This research series is an intentional meeting point between economic policy and gender equality. Its objective is to create new evidence for further policy advocacy that activates new allies in the coalition towards digital gender equality. Our fundamental point is that **this is not just a “women’s issue”: it is an economic imperative for governments looking to scale their digital economies.**

From our research, women are achieving extraordinary things online. However, many of those who have made this transition have benefited from other privileges within their background and speak to the continued marginalisation of women in society. Closing the digital gender gap will require intentional policy action that centres women’s experiences and addresses the specific barriers that can apply disproportionately or exclusively to women.

This report also shares results from our survey, among Indian women with a mobile phone, on the transformational influence of internet access. In our survey, a woman with internet access, no matter her educational background, was markedly more confident in finding information, all the way up to **seven times** more likely to be confident in finding a good price for something they wished to buy.

Beyond informational autonomy, women with internet access in our survey were more likely to participate in several parts of society. From using government services to looking for work, from taking a class to buying something, the internet has become a lifeline towards participation in society.

Our research documents the successes of the early adopters and describes the untapped potential in closing the digital gender gap. It is evident that millions of women and girls remain unconnected to the internet.

With economic imperative and a wide range of policy options, policymakers can — and must — act to accelerate women’s connectivity. The [REACT policy framework](#) has been a guiding resource in this direction. In this report, we highlight five policy interventions from across Asia to illustrate that action is possible.

Policymakers should:

- Protect and enhance everyone’s **rights** online.
- Use **education** to equip everyone – especially women – with the skills they need to access and use the web.
- Deliver affordable – or free – **access** to an open web.
- Ensure relevant and empowering **content** for women is available and used.
- Set and measure concrete gender equity **targets**.

We can close the digital gender gap — but only if we have the courage to act.