

DIGITALISATION FOR DEVELOPMENT. A TOOLKIT FOR
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PRACTITIONERS
INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS (INTPA)

Gender

InfoSheet n°10

This InfoSheet is part of a series on digitalisation and relevance to EU International Partnerships and development cooperation programmes. The Toolkit is designed to provide key definitions, main opportunities and challenges for global development presented by digital transformation, case studies and suggested further reading. Learn more on [Cap4Dev](#)

Introduction

Digital technologies are increasingly important in the pursuit of progress toward the European Union's (EU) strategies and promotion of freedom, security, and justice, as well as toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Digital transformation is an enabler of significant advancement toward outcomes associated with both EU policy and the seventeen SDGs, including Goal 5: Gender Equality.

Gender equality is a state of equal access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender identity. Distinct from gender equality is gender equity, which can be understood as a strategy to reach gender equality, as it proactively addresses the foundational disparities¹ in access and opportunities between men and women² in order to ensure a future state of equality.

Gender equitable approaches, or gender mainstreaming,³ are essential in any digitalisation development program and can help in closing the gender digital divide. The **gender digital divide**⁴ refers to inequalities between women and men in relation to a) their access to digital resources, b) their capacities to engage with digital tools, and c) the existing opportunities they can leverage to engage with digital technologies.

Digital tools, platforms and social networks make it possible for women and girls, and men and boys, in all their diversity, to organise for collective action and engage in advocacy, to join gender equality

and other social movements, and to socialise and participate in cultural events. Social networks can document denial of rights and abuse, mobilise support for survivors of online and offline gender-based violence and harassment, and amplify pressure for change. New web-based applications enable Internet users to publish content and check data, as well as creating digital communities – shifting the power dynamics between information creators, owners, and users.

As the EU leverages digitalisation as an enabler of global development, it should rely on both best practices to mainstream gender into digital approaches and utilize digital tools in the pursuit of global gender equality. The EU's Digital for Development (D4D) approach—initiated in 2017—and the African Union's Digital transformation Strategy for Africa (2020 -2023) present a series of digitalisation priorities in the pursuit of a gender-equitable digital future. These are mainly related to i) promoting digital policy and regulatory reform, ii) ensuring universal access to a sustainable, affordable and secure connection, iii) promoting digital literacy for girls in education, and iv) supporting the provision of public and private e-services.

This infosheet introduces challenges and opportunities for the above focus areas; it also provides a list of good practices, brief facts related to current projects, case studies, and additional resources. While data are based primarily on a study covering Africa, the concepts can be applied to other regions.

¹ Foundational disparities are existing inequalities or large differences (in this case between men and women) that can impede the development or progress toward equal outcomes.

² Gender and Development (GAD) prioritizes the study of diverse socio-cultural gender norms associated with men and women. The focus remains not on challenging the gender binary, but on understanding gender roles and relations between men and women, and their impact on livelihood development, socio-economic outcomes, and other goals. As such, this report uses female and woman interchangeably, reflecting the GAD approach without attempting to subscribe to the gender binary or reject the existence of gender fluidity.

³ The inclusion of gender-based analysis and consideration in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes and policies.

⁴ To illustrate, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), globally in 2020 62 % of men were using the Internet, compared with 57 % of women. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2021/11/15/the-gender-digital-divide/>



Challenges and Opportunities for a gender-balanced approach to digitalisation

» Digital policy and regulatory reform

At present, digital policy frameworks across the African continent cover issues ranging from affordable access to digital tools and the Internet, to online rights and privacy. Gender frameworks cover issues ranging from women's empowerment in health and education to policies prohibiting violence against girls and women⁵. Some gender frameworks promote women's engagement in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), but there are still many opportunities to do more to mainstream gender into digital policy frameworks. For example, national policy frameworks could endorse digital for gender, or cybersecurity policies could better address online safety for women and focus on gender-based harassment. To enforce gender-responsive policies, important protocols must be established, and the proper training provided to those enforcing policy. Because policymaking in Africa is largely dominated by men mirroring the worldwide foundational inequality between men and women's participation in leadership, taking complementary action to advance women's leadership is critical, as women leaders may be more likely to advocate for the mainstreaming of gender in policy frameworks.

» Supporting universal access to affordable connectivity

While the trend toward digital transformation is growing, this global digital transformation is not gender neutral. Across low and middle income countries (LMICs), 165 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone, and mobile Internet usage is 20% lower for women than for men⁶.

Several **foundational inequalities** further highlight the gender digital divide as related to access to and use of digital technologies. Already, mobile technologies constitute 9% to 20% (on average)

of monthly salaries in Sub-Saharan Africa⁷ and in countries where connectivity is more expensive, even fewer women are digitally engaged, and the gender digital divide is greater. With less access to credit, fewer formal job market opportunities, and lower incomes than their male counterparts, women face disproportionate cost barriers.

Because connectivity and access to the Internet can be made more affordable through mobile technologies, addressing the gender gap in access to mobile phones is a crucial strategy. Such actions should also be combined with awareness of *gender challenges*, so that not all women and not all men are assumed to have identical challenges. For example, a dearth of *networking and electrical power infrastructure* exists especially in rural areas, which constitutes further barriers to connectivity for rural households.

Even with improved mobile access in both urban and rural areas, however, *socio-cultural norms* limit women's and girls' digital engagement. For example, women report needing permission to use phones and access mobile technology; phones are often owned by male heads of household. Women also report needing proof of identification to purchase a mobile phone subscription, and they may lack access to this formal proof. Meanwhile, even with improved infrastructure, women and girls more often lack access to safe and affordable spaces to use the Internet. Internet cafes often cater to male clientele, who, unlike women, do not need permission to spend time alone in public places. The many roles women have to fill (e.g., formal work, household chores, child minding) also reduces their available time to spend in these places, even when permitted.

» Promoting digital skills and literacy

Because of the foundational disparity in access to formal schooling and skill development opportunities between males and females, in some situations women disproportionately face illiteracy challenges and are more likely to report a lack of understanding about the Internet and digital tools, and to claim that digitalisation is irrelevant to their lives. They are also more susceptible to abuse and disinformation and more likely to mention cyber security concerns and fears of harassment when using the Internet.

To address this challenge, it is critical to advocate for gender equality in access to education in general, as well as for the integration of digital literacy and skill-building in public school curricula⁸. However, due to challenges in scaling up digital integration (e.g., a lack of digitally trained teachers, insufficient infrastructure and electricity, etc.), it is critical to invest in alternative training solutions and programming for digital literacy beyond public schools. This alternative training can focus on specific skills and better respond to changing needs of the population (or changes in digital technologies). Gender mainstreaming must be present in alternative programming to enhance digital skills and literacy.

Public school curricula should also include a focus on working with men and boys to combat harmful stereotypes such as those that say girls are not fit for careers in STEM; stigmas contribute to women's lack of confidence in choosing digitally focused careers. Sexual harassment also needs to be combatted in school if girls are to feel safe and comfortable attending class.

⁵ 52% of young women and girls using the Internet have experienced online abuse, including threatening messages, sexual harassment, and the sharing of private images without consent, EU GAP III briefing.

⁶ The Mobile Gender Gap Report, GSMA, 2020.

⁷ Africa Regional Snapshot: 2018 Affordability Report, Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2018.

⁸ Women are under-represented in ICT careers; men are 4 times more likely to be ICT specialists. EU GAP III Note 2021.



»» Woman digital innovators and entrepreneurs

While there are over 300 digital platforms currently functioning across Africa (80% were launched by local entrepreneurs⁹), several foundational inequalities contribute to women's disproportionate lack of formal labour market integration and ability to launch similar successful companies. These include a lack of access to education, travel, capital, and leadership; a lack of policies prohibiting discrimination; and social norms that suggest women fail to make good leaders in STEM. Regarding access to finance for entrepreneurship, while there are some opportunities for women to start businesses, they are mainly focused on microfinance. Women are still often excluded from the formal financial sector.

Investing in African women entrepreneurs or prioritizing women's leadership within existing businesses, however, especially those in the digital space, is an opportunity for the continent, as women are more likely to develop digital solutions that focus on important social issues. Establishing supports for women entrepreneur networks and working with existing businesses and start-ups (especially women-led start-ups) are also important opportunities to consider in order to support and sustain an appropriate and growing environment for digital transformation and job creation. In addition, the mainstreaming of gender equality into existing entrepreneurship programmes—i.e., ensuring training content is gender-sensitive or specifically developed for women—can be a basis for gender-responsive, digital entrepreneurship training and mentorship.

»» Supporting the provision of public and private e-services

A significant number of current tools and platforms do not ensure that their products and services are reaching men and women equitably. This is often a result of the false assumption that digitalisation is gender neutral. To ensure digital tools are reaching everyone, organisations and providers should mainstream gender in their approaches to tool development and in outreach campaigns.

For tool development, as diverse e-services become more effective in reaching large populations, especially in remote areas, providers should strive to better understand and respond to the complexity of women's needs. Digital for health, agriculture, and finance can spread important development services and close gender gaps. Digital tools, for example, can support women's empowerment by reducing their time burdens, provide them with information about their rights, or share best practices. Through digitalisation, women may have greater control over their healthcare costs and finance, access alternative financing or extension service information, and receive electronic payments for agricultural work.



⁹ World Bank Africa's Pulse , An Analysis of Issues Shaping Africa's Economic Future, No. 20, October 2019, available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32480>.

GOOD PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Digital policy and regulatory reform

- Advocate for participatory, holistic, and gender approaches, and include women in policymaking,
- Develop government capacity in the area of legislation in order to adopt reforms that unleash women's entrepreneurial potential,
- Ensure gender-disaggregated data across programs and policies to ensure the future of the digital economy,
- Support reforms, programmes, strategies, and measures via technical and financial assistance,
- Promote understanding of and response to digital privacy and safety concerns for women and girls.



Universal access to connectivity

- Address and close the gender gap in mobile phone access as well as invest in rural mobile connectivity, with a particular focus on women and girls,
- Increase the affordability of connectivity for women and increase their access to the Internet,
- Support the participation of women's organizations in online networks,¹⁰
- Create and support digital safe spaces for women and girls.



Digital skills and literacy

- Incorporate digital literacy training into public schools and monitor girls' attendance,
- Fund digital literacy education and advocate for private sector engagement, with a focus on women entrepreneurs and girls,
- Work with men and boys to reduce the stigma for women and girls' participation in STEM and digitalisation programmes,
- Support governments to protect children's rights in the digital transformation.



Women digital innovators and entrepreneurs

- Support the setting up of women entrepreneurs' networks as a base for gender-responsive, digital entrepreneurship training and mentoring programmes tailored to women's needs and interests,
- Support networks of women entrepreneurs to participate in ensuring equitable training opportunities,
- Promote and address female representation in leadership at all levels of business,
- Work with the private sector to enhance gender-responsive e-services, i.e., through inclusive marketing and/or awareness raising campaigns, tailored services, such as targeted financial e-services and products.



Public and private e-services

- Identify and foster mobile-based, e-service 'niche' sectors that can benefit women and develop and design 'Digital4GenderEquality' projects, drawing on EU sectoral expertise (i.e., by addressing the gender angle and the challenges that women face in accessing and using the Internet, digital technologies, and services),
- Support e-governance apps and services that drive gender equality and equity,
- Support projects that rely on social media to share information that can bridge the gender digital divide.

¹⁰ Online networking is the process of developing social and professional connections online. Unlike traditional networking, the process of online networking heavily involves the use of digital tools to form relationships. <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/online-networking/>



CASE STUDY

The “Jukta Hoe Mukta” (United We Stand) Project in Bangladesh¹¹

In order to promote decent work and safe migration for girls and young women in slums and marginalized communities, the EU-funded “United We Stand” project in Bangladesh leveraged smart and standard phone donations from a mobile company’s corporate responsibility program and developed an online platform. Through a “virtual adolescent hub,” 220 girls and young women visited the mobile application/platform to receive and share information on various services—including health and education services, and financial and legal aid support. The initiative empowered girls and young women to take control of their own employment and migratory decisions, based on new information, and increased their awareness of achieving self-reliance and safety.

CASE STUDY

Tech4Policy Project in Kosovo¹²

The Tech4Policy project—funded by the EU and implemented by Open Data Kosovo and Girls Coding Kosovo—trained 250 girls and young women in ICT skills so that they could become coders and programmers for social and political good. Working with 10 local governments, the project identified gaps that the young programmers could address through digital services. By the end of their training cycle, the 250 young women coders were able to propose innovative products for their local municipalities, and winning ideas were granted € 20,000 for implementation in collaboration with municipal partners. Not only did this project boost the number of women coders, but it increased women and girls’ civic engagement and their opportunities for digital based careers. It also broke down social norms that suggest that girls are not fit for technology fields.

¹¹ EU, (2020). GAP III Briefing note n. 5 Digital4GenderEquality: How to develop gender transformative digital programmes.

¹² Idem.

Selected Resources on Digitalisation and Gender

Organization	Resource	Description
European Union (EU)	The EU Gender Equality Strategy	The EU Gender Equality Strategy shares actions toward a gender-equal European continent and informs the EU's approach and policy toward women's empowerment and gender equality in other regions. It highlights the development potential of gender equity and provides guidance for embracing a gender-mainstreamed digital transformation.
	EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III	The EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III, 2020-2025) identifies six areas of engagement to promote, ensure, and strengthen women and girls' participation, rights, and safety. One engagement area references the digital transformation. An informational joint staff working document on gender equality and women's empowerment highlights objectives and indicators that guide the implementation of GAP III. A GAP III Briefing note highlights a) how to mainstream gender in digitalisation policies and programs to close the gender digital divide, and b) how to leverage digitalisation to meet GAP III objectives.
African Union (AU)	Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for 2018-2028	Launched in 2019, the AU's Strategy for Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment (GEWE) for 2018-2028 presents a framework for legislation, financing, and action to enable women to participate in social, economic, and political realms. While digitalisation is not mainstreamed throughout the four pillars of the framework, the first pillar highlights the need to increase women and girls' access to and participation in the technology sector and makes specific reference to investing in STEM education and tech hubs.
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)	Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age	In partnership with UN Women, ITU launched the Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age to promote awareness, global action, and commitments to ensure women and girls are not left behind in global digital transformation. The multi-stakeholder initiative promotes equitable access to digital tools, investing in women entrepreneurs, and enhancing digital skill development for women and girls.
	Measuring the Information Society Report 2017	Launched in 2017 at the World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Symposium, 'Measuring the Information Society Report' presents data, trends, and developments in the global digital divide, including the gender digital divide. It includes country profiles to benchmark performance on various indicators.
Organisation for economic cooperation and development (OECD)	Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)	The OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) "measures discrimination against women in social institutions across 180 countries." The SIGI identifies drivers of gender inequality and provides data to inform policy change. The SIGI is an official source of sex-disaggregated data for the number of individuals using the Internet.
	Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker	The DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker records and tracks global development activities that target gender equality as their main objective. The marker tracks the amount of development financing aimed at promoting gender equality and advances for women and girls. Additional OECD publications are good resources for consideration: Bridging the Digital Gender Divide , The Digital Economy , and Understanding the Digital Divide .
SMART Africa Alliance	SMART Africa Manifesto	The SMART Africa Manifesto was adopted in 2014 in Addis Ababa by all AU heads of state. They agreed to work together to enhance ICT developments and promote affordable access to the Internet. Their manifesto presents a framework for implementation and follow-up, and references pillars and enablers. To ensure the pillar of 'Sustainable Development,' the manifesto suggests that ICT developments be leveraged to empower women.
United Nations (UN)	United Nations University	A report by Araba Sey and Nancy Hafkin from the EQUALS research group, entitled 'Taking stock: Data and evidence on gender equality in digital access, skills and leadership,' shares important information about the intersection between gender equality and digitalisation
	Data2X	Data2X is a UN Foundation initiative with a mission to "improve the availability, quality, and use of gender data in order to make a practical difference in the lives of women and girls worldwide." ¹³ The initiative acknowledges the importance of sex-disaggregated data to close the global gender gap, including the gender digital divide.

¹³ Data2X. (n.d.). Data2X | Partnering for Better Gender Data. [online] Available at: <https://data2x.org/>.

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