



**WORLD WIDE WEB  
FOUNDATION**



**A4AI ALLIANCE FOR  
AFFORDABLE INTERNET**

## **Consultation on Bridging the Digital Gender Divide**

### **Submission to the ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet)**

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#### **Summary**

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 divide. This finding reflects the very limited progress that has been made since previous assessments (most notably those by the Broadband Commission in 2013 and the Web Foundation in 2014) which revealed similarly serious shortcomings in advancing women's opportunities for online access and use. Without a specific focus on improving access and use opportunities for women, policies will continue to exclude half the population. 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.

In addition to developing policies that focus on rights, education, access, content, and targets, as outlined above, it is critical that women are included in the actual policymaking process. Policy designed for all citizens — and particularly policy focused on affecting women — should be designed with women, and governments must work to secure women's participation in the policymaking process. 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. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many other countries, where women's voices are left entirely out of the policymaking process. It is now time for governments to take responsibility and immediate action to maximise the benefits of the internet and emerging technologies for all people.

## 1. What approaches and examples of good practices are available to increase Internet access and digital literacy of women and girls, including in decision-making processes on Internet public policy?

Through the SDGs, UN Member States have committed to achieving universal internet access in least developed countries by 2020 (Goal 9c) and to enhance the use of technology, particularly information and communication technologies (ICTs), to promote women's empowerment (Goal 5b). Achieving the SDGs will require bold and immediate action. Research by the [Alliance for Affordable Internet](#) predicts that on our current trajectory we will only achieve universal affordable internet access in Least Developed Countries by 2042 - 22 years after the target date set by the international community. Our [Women's Rights Online](#) study further reveals extreme gender inequalities in internet access, digital skills, and online rights in urban poor demographics across nine developing countries. The International Telecommunications Union reports that the global gender gap in internet access [widened from 11% in 2013 to 12% in 2016](#). This gap prevents women from accessing education and employment opportunities, health information, digital financial services, e-government services and much more. Failing to close the digital gender gap will further entrench inequalities and undermine national development, leading to lost opportunities for economic growth and further marginalizing women. However, governments can avoid this scenario by putting gender and ICT front and centre of the current policy agendas through gender responsive ICT policymaking.

Research shows that currently many national plans or strategies include a rhetorical commitment to gender equity, but fail to translate this into concrete, measurable targets backed by resources. In our [recent research](#) of 58 low and middle income countries national broadband policies, countries scored just 2.73 out of 10 for implementing concrete targets for gender equality in ICT access and use, indicating very little to no discussion of the digital gender gap and possible responses to address the problem at the policy level. The highest score awarded was a five (out of 10) — and only six countries achieved this score (Botswana, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey). Each of these six countries has recognised in some form the need to address the digital gender gap at the policy level, or has developed national level programmes targeted at improving internet access and use for women and girls, but none of them have any measurable targets for improving women's access and use as part of a comprehensive strategy, or national ICT or broadband policy.

Countries must adopt gender responsive ICT policies to increase internet access and digital literacy of women and girls. Good practices for incorporating gender into ICT policy include:

- Ensure that **all analysis conducted for the purposes of developing policies and plans integrate gender** and gender considerations, [from network deployment analysis to universal access strategies and priorities](#).
- **Involve gender advocates and experts in the policy and planning process from the start** to ensure women-centric policy development.

- **Establish time-bound targets to achieve gender equality in access** across all areas of policies and plans, from skills building to adoption and use.
- **Consider allocating a percentage of the resources available to support women-centred activities**, including resources to promote and support women ICT entrepreneurs, digital literacy training for women and girls, and targeted public access and other projects to support access and use for women and girls.
- **Ensure that all skill building and training programmes are developed considering the needs of women and girls** across all educational levels. These programmes should: consider what themes would be most relevant to participants; offer training opportunities for all levels, from basic skills to more advanced coding and design; consider the location of programmes and the gender of trainers.
- **Establish quotas to ensure the equal participation of women and other marginalised groups in all programmes** supported by national policies and plans, especially rural and poor populations.

Additionally, we propose the following shared policy priorities for governments to REACT to close the gender digital divide.

#### Rights = R

- 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.

#### Education = E

- 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.

#### Access = A

- Prioritise policy reforms to cut the prohibitive cost of connecting. Work towards the Alliance for Affordable Internet '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 focused on women.

Content = C

- 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.
- Audit all government websites to assess the relevance of their content for women, and their effectiveness in supporting women to access information.

Targets = T

- 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.

## **2. What approaches and examples of good practices are available to promote the access and use of ICTs by SMEs in developing and least-developed countries, particularly those owned/managed by women, in order to achieve greater participation in the digital economy?**

Countries must adopt a new and more ambitious target for internet affordability to achieve greater participation in all sectors of the digital economy, including by SMEs, particularly those owned by women. We propose a new [“1 for 2” affordability target](#): 1GB of data priced at 2% or less of average monthly income.

The [2017 Affordability Report](#) provides insights into policies and strategies to achieve the “1 for 2” affordability target. Additionally, [low cost public internet and community access](#) facilities can help to bridge the affordability gap to promote access and use of ICTs by SMEs.

Other priorities to promote greater participation in the digital economy, as outlined by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) include:

- Increasing competition and transparency in every layer of the connectivity market.
- Making better use of Universal Access and Service Funds to subsidise broadband connectivity in underserved areas, with concrete targets for reducing the gender gap in access and adoption – including, for example, through community access options targeting women and girls.
- Promoting flexible use of low-value spectrum bands for free or very low-cost connectivity (e.g. community Wi-Fi).
- Removing luxury taxes on ICT devices.

### **3. Which are the available sources and mechanisms for measuring women's participation in the digital economy with focus on SME's and micro-enterprises?**

To help ensure that there is sustained pressure for the implementation of policy to achieve the SDGs on women and technology, the World Wide Web Foundation developed a [Digital Gender Gap Audit Scorecard](#), with support from UN Women and Sida. This Audit aims to fill the evidence gap in assessing the digital gender divide by bringing together 14 simple indicators for which reliable empirical evidence exists or should exist based on established indicators.

Looked at collectively, these indicators can be used to indicate country progress towards closing the digital gender divide. This is an interim tool for monitoring the gaps, until national gender and ICT indicators are developed and data is regularly collected and made available to monitor women's internet access, use, and digital empowerment.

The indicators included in the Digital Gender Gap Audit are grouped into 5 themes which address the main barriers to women's participation in the digital economy. These barriers include: a) internet access and women's digital empowerment, b) affordability, c) digital skills and education, d) relevant content and services for women, e) online safety.

The results of the Digital Gender Gap Audit are intended to be used as a starting point for broad national, regional and global consultations. By providing proxy indicators for data which is otherwise largely unavailable at the national and global levels, the Scorecard is intended to be used to hold governments accountable for progress on the SDG gender and ICT targets, by monitoring country-level policy commitments, implementation and outcomes. The Scorecard can also be used to identify evidence gaps where data on women and ICTs is missing or not publically available, despite national commitments to monitor related indicators as part of SDG commitments. Evidence of missing data provides a "Red Flag" on the need for the country to urgently develop and implement a strategy to collect national data on that indicator, and to report data to global bodies such as the ITU and UNESCO.

[Digital Gender Gap Audits](#) have been conducted in collaboration with [members of the Women's Rights Online network](#) in thirteen countries including: Cameroon, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Philippines, and Uganda. Several country Audits are underway in Costa Rica, Mexico, Myanmar and Paraguay.

### **4. What measures/policies could be envisioned in order to foster the role of women as entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs, specifically in developing and least-developed countries?**

Governments must urgently adopt the recommendations put forward by the [UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment](#) to foster women in entrepreneurship and leadership. These recommendations include:

- Tackling adverse norms and promoting positive role models
- Ensuring legal protection and reforming discriminatory laws and regulations
- Recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid work and care
- Building assets – Digital, financial and property
- Changing business culture and practice
- Improving public sector practices in employment and procurement
- Strengthening visibility, collective voice and representation

Additionally, support to female micro-entrepreneurs to access digital training and financial services should be given priority, along with the online availability of user-friendly, local-language information, services and products that empower women and enhance their livelihoods.

**5. What are the gaps in addressing these challenges? How can they be addressed and what is the role of governments?**

- Invest in women's education and leadership development.
- Eliminate and prevent all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls by ensuring women's rights are protected and reforming discriminatory laws and regulations.
- Tackle adverse social norms.
- Provide access to credit and financial services.
- Ensure that there is [gender-responsive broadband planning](#).
- Ensure that all government line ministries take a gender-responsive approach to their policy and planning. This can include the use of internal gender audits and in the case of financial planning - gender budgeting.
- Encourage greater gender (and racial) diversity among workers and leaders in the public and private sectors by sharing evidence of the associated [economic benefits](#) and via financial and other incentives.