

Gender and digital access gaps and barriers in Asia: But what about after access?

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Summary of text:

There is a consistent gender gap in technology adoption and use, across mobile phone ownership, Internet use, social media use, and digital skills, among other indicators. In several Asian countries, the key reason cited for women's digital exclusion is simply a lack of awareness of what the Internet is. Low levels of education and income, as well as gendered social norms, are also key to maintaining gender disparities.

Understanding the intrinsic role of gendered social norms in maintaining barriers to access requires context-specific understanding of the respective country or population to which it applies. In Pakistan, the gender disparity in access could be reflective of social norms which limit women's mobility, their role in household decisions, and their involvement in spending decisions. This can even be reflective of women's own conscious decisions to limit their use, in order to ensure safety and minimize additional disruptions in their daily lives. Conversely, qualitative research has shown that, according to social norms, women in Myanmar in fact play a central role in financial decisions in the household; however, due to affordability constraints in a newly liberalized economy, male household members are automatically prioritized since they are more likely to leave the house for work or study.

Access to a device and a connection alone are not sufficient to meaningfully transform the lives of women and girls. Ensuring women are aware of the range of possibilities for working, earning, and learning through technology is crucial to progress. A further prerequisite for women's economic and social empowerment is the necessary digital knowledge, such as an understanding of how to set up and manage a social media business page or an online freelancing account. In an environment where services and demand are constantly evolving, the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling is particularly challenging for women, who experience greater time poverty. These constraints are compounded by illiteracy and confidence gaps, which place women at greater risk of digital threats.

Women without digital skills tend to lack the confidence required to use the Internet, with some restricting their mobile use to so-called 'application islands' due to the inability to adapt and apply skills to new applications. Often this is limited to social media. Women are also likely to rely on friends and family, who may have limited skills themselves, to teach them how to use mobile applications and services.

Key recommendations:

- There is a clear need to move beyond the focus on access and ensure that women are equipped with the knowledge, awareness and skills to leverage connectivity for their economic and social empowerment.
- Comparable gender-disaggregated data must be continually collected to monitor progress on primary indicators such as access and ownership, as well as on secondary level indicators such as digital skills. This work must encompass qualitative research for greater context-specific insight and take account of the special status of vulnerable groups of women to prevent further marginalization.