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Universal and Meaningful Connectivity: Are the SDGs Fit for Purpose to Report on Progress for Women and Girls in Technology? An Approach for Gender Mainstreaming of the Digital Ecosystem

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[1] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Universal and meaningful connectivity: Are the SDGs fit for purpose to report on progress for women and girls in technology?
An approach for gender mainstreaming of the digital ecosystem.

International Telecommunication Union

INTRODUCTION

As the UN's specialized agency for digital technology, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is guided by its Resolution 70 (Rev. Dubai, 2022)[2], which highlights the importance of mainstreaming a gender perspective in ITU and promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women through telecommunications/information and communication technologies (ICTs), and by Resolution 55 (Rev. Kigali, 2022)[3] which instructs ITU to promote the use of ICTs for the economic and social empowerment of women and girls and to assist members in mainstreaming gender in policy mechanisms and processes. Moreover, through Resolution 76 (Rev. Kigali, 2022)[4], ITU is committed to promoting ICT skills development and national strategies for increasing access and use of ICTs among young women and men for their social and economic development and empowerment.

To support its gender mainstreaming work, ITU regularly collects and disseminates ICT indicators related to individuals accessing and using ICTs. These indicators can be disaggregated by gender, age, education, labour force status, and occupation. ITU monitors and tracks three gender-related indicators that are included in the SDG Indicators Monitoring Framework: (1) "*proportion of*

[2] https://www.itu.int/en/publications/Pages/publications.aspx?lang=en&media=paper&parent=S-CONF-PLEN-2019. Kindly note that this resolution is under revision at the Plenipotentiary Conference (PP), ITU's highest policy-making body that meets once every four years. The PP-22 is being held in Bucharest, Romania, from 26 September to 14 October 2022.

[3] Mainstreaming a gender perspective in ITU to enhance women's empowerment through telecommunications/ITCs.

[4] Promoting information and communication technologies among young women and men for social and economic empowerment

individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex" (which is one of the gender-related indicators monitoring SDG 5), (2) "*proportion of individuals using the Internet, by sex*", and (3) "*proportion of individuals with ICT skills, by sex*".

Latest figures as published in ITU's Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2021 show that the digital gender divide is narrowing globally, but large gaps remain in poorer countries. Globally, as of 2020, an average of 62% of men use the Internet compared with 57% of women. Although the digital gender divide has been narrowing in all world regions, and has been virtually eliminated in the developed world, wide gaps remain in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and in Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), so still more effective action is urgently needed to address a range of barriers – cultural, financial and skills-related – that are impeding Internet uptake, especially among women.

The use of technology, especially over the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic, has revolutionized the uses of cyberspace for people around the world. For example, in education, the amalgamation of software and hardware technology has gradually changed methodologies utilized in teaching, enabling and bringing online hybrid learning models faster than ever before. The pandemic has also facilitated the use of technology in professional as well as commercial spheres. However, it must be noted that these changes came out of sudden necessity and reduced behavioural choice in the wake of the pandemic. While educational and professional service models were able to adapt to the pandemic in some parts of the world, lack of access to broadband and digital services has further magnified worldwide regional and gender disparities. Especially in LDCs, the rapid movement toward online education, commerce, work and communication threatens to leave the unconnected and untrained behind. Progress toward achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) has been hampered further by the pandemic, as women and girls are less likely than men and boys to have digital access, skills and leadership opportunities such as virtual educational and professional spaces.

SDG 5 for achieving gender equality is severely hampered in some parts of the world; for example, just 19% of women access and use the Internet in LDCs[5]. Furthermore, the lack of leadership and employment of women in the technological sector exacerbates a digital leadership, investment and entrepreneurship gender gap.[6] A key factor to navigate meaningful and universal connectivity in alignment with the SDGs will be analysing gender-disaggregated data on distribution and access to

[5] ITU gender backgrounder 2021: https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx
[6] Silicon Valley Bank 2020: Women in US Technology Leadership https://www.svb.com/women-in-technology

technology worldwide and suggesting alternative forms of policymaking and investment for gender-specific technological education and access.

The EQUALS Global Partnership[7] brings together around 100 organisations (including co-founding partner ITU) working together cooperatively across public and private sectors to close the gender digital divide in all its aspects: access to technology and the internet, digital skills training and education, and leadership opportunities in the tech sector and digital-driven entrepreneurship. The EQUALS Research Coalition gathers gender-disaggregated and gender mainstreamed data to inform the work of the partnership, and the statistics revealed in recent years are not heartening, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a picture of the current gender digital divide, the partnership states that women are 25% less likely to have access to basic knowledge to access digital technology; furthermore, women are four times less likely to know how to program, and 13 times less likely to file for a technology patent.

These statistics are facilitated by widespread gender stereotypes ranging from lack of social acceptance for women in male dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) career fields to lack of welcoming learning environments for women wishing to enter these fields.

Although girls and young women outnumber (and often outperform) boys and young men in STEM education in developed countries, this early success has not translated to a corresponding narrowing of the gender gap in STEM leadership. Many factors hinder women from gaining equity and progressing in technical fields. These include: stereotypes, gender norms, as well as lack of necessary infrastructure, funding, female mentors and role models, capacity building, and training.

REALITY CHECK OF REGION-SPECIFIC DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

ASIA

According to the latest data collected by ITU, globally, the female to male ratio of Internet usage is 57:62. However, across Asia and the Pacific, one can witness an overall lower usage of the Internet. Out of the population that does have access to the Internet, 54% are women while 57% are men. [8]

[7] https://www.equalsintech.org/

[8] "The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2021 - GSMA," accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2021.pdf.

Regional divides within Asia reflect a more problematic picture, where in South Asia 36% fewer women have Internet access compared to men. Furthermore, 83% of women in South Asia hold ownership of a mobile phone but only 58% of them have Internet access. The divide can be measured with more accuracy when analysing data within Asia, where 15% of women are less likely to use a mobile phone in lower and middle-income countries. The region most affected is South Asia, where the usage reduced from 50% in 2019 to 36% in 2020, within one year.[9] This reduction was presumably exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionally affecting women's access to the digital world.

Moving to Nepal and Pakistan, the geographical gender digital divide becomes even more evident. The number of boys having access to digital services such as smartphones, laptops, and the Internet in Nepal is twice that of girls. The digital map of Pakistan also reveals a similar picture.[10]

AFRICA

As one needs to examine the disparity in access to technology, it is important to keep in mind the lack of sex-disaggregated data in telecommunication and technology research. The non-pursuit of sex-disaggregated data is itself as one major hindrance in measuring digital disparity between genders and contributes to a murky picture of the gender digital divide.

Although there is data available on analytical digital indicators ranging from access to skills, very little of this data in Africa is sex-disaggregated. Thus, the data accumulated on technology and gender in Africa provides a picture of overall geographical disparity and digital divide but fails to capture a more nuanced picture of the digital gender divide within the region. Following ITU's data in Africa the percentage of female population using the Internet is of 24% with respect to 35% of male population.[11] The problem is often explained as due to a lack of proper measuring statistical instruments arising from the lack of economic resources; however, even in advanced economies within the region, statistical data on indicators like cyber violence is widely unavailable. The lack of

[9] "The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2021 - GSMA," accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2021.pdf.
[10] ITU, "Tackling the Digital Gender Divide in Asia," ITU Hub, May 23, 2022, https://www.itu.int/hub/2022/05/digital-gender-divide-asia-unicef-rosa/#:~:text=Across%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific,use%20the%20Internet%20than%20men.
[11] ITU Facts and Figures, 2021. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2021/11/15/the-gender-digital-divide/

statistical instruments is more prevalent in countries other than Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, especially Mauritius, Niger, and Rwanda.[12]

LATIN AMERICA

62% of institutions in the tech industry in Latin America and the Caribbean report the existence of a stark gender digital divide in their respective countries. Furthermore, as technical education is missing from the educational landscape it is widely believed that the digital transformation process does not entirely cater to the needs of women in Latin America and the Caribbean. The participation of women in the transformation process was as low as 50% due to the lack of technical skills and competencies.

Therefore, it is widely recommended that the reduction in the digital gender gap must be facilitated by greater access to technical education and more equitable participation in the job market.[13]

MENA REGION

The lowest representation of women in technology is seen in the MENA region. Even though it can be assumed the trends are getting better, despite trends suggesting that rates are increasing, the overall participation in ICT by women remains as low as 50% among all 16 countries in the region combined. The most extreme statistic is shared by Yemen with participation of just 6.3% of women.

This sharp inequality can be articulated as women's inability to participate in the professions themselves due to socio-political factors. Thus, women's absence from the digital labour force can be seen as an inevitable result (and perhaps a causal factor as well) of the low access to technology for women. Recent studies indicate that 56% of women in the region are not considered Internet users.[14]

EUROPE AND CIS

Europe and CIS are two regions in the world with the smallest gender digital divide. While in the CIS region, 79 percent of women use the Internet, the percentage of male Internet users remains at 8I. In Europe, the rate of female Internet users remains at 83 percent. Thus, the hope of gender parity, at least for Internet access, is closest in Europe and the CIS. The credit in this respect can be

[12] EQUALS, "Equals Global Partnership to Bridge the Digital Gender Divide," equals, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.equalsintech.org/.

[13] "Latin America and Caribbean Need to Reduce Gender Gap in Digital Transformation," IADB, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.iadb.org/en/news/latin-america-and-caribbean-need-reduce-gender-gap-digital-transformation.

[14] "Youth Blog: The Gender Digital Divide in the MENA Region: Innovation in Times of Crisis," UN Women – Arab States, accessed September 28, 2022, https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/07/youth-blog-the-gender-digital-divide-in-the-mena-region.

generally attributed to a higher level of development and more ready availability of Internet infrastructure, access to mobile phones and other devices, community support and wealth. Furthermore, the cost of connecting to Internet technology itself remains much cheaper in Europe and CIS as opposed to Africa. (18.6% for fixed broadband connectivity in Africa compared to 1.3% in Europe and 1.2% in CIS). However, it must be noted that even with statistics that approach gender parity, absolute elimination of the gender digital divide has not taken place.[15]

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

All regions of the world have their own set of restrictions, either economic, social, cultural or political, that have limited the access of women to technology. While the lack of economic resources is the most evident, other cultural factors (for example, the social preference of men in technological education and thereby technology sector employment) drives the economic gender digital divide. Furthermore, political factors such as the legitimization of unequal access by law in some places crystalizes the gender divide even more, as international standards of equality are superseded by domestic legal standards of unequal access.

Mainstream gender plays a key role in the policy and political decision-making process. As historical gender roles are translated into social norms, they can negatively affect any initiative that should be taken in favour of digital empowerment of women. Furthermore, in regions where there are fewer women involved in the policymaking process, the development of equitable gender policies is precarious.

Policies and strategies aiming at bridging this digital gender divide have been put in place by some governments, but they do not seem to be generalized across the globe. Gender is referenced in only half of national overarching ICT policies or Master Plans, according to ITU. Furthermore, over 40% of countries studied in the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI)'s Affordability Report 2020 had no meaningful policies or programs to expand women's access to the Internet.[16]

Developing digital policies and strategies (i.e., national digital agendas, national broadband plans and other strategic documents related to the digital economy) as well as designing and implementing programmes and projects that are gender responsive, contributes to levelling the playing field between women and men, ensuring that both groups have the same opportunities.

[15] ITU. Facts and figures 2021. ITU. Accessed October 7, 2022. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2021/11/15/affordability-of-ict-services/.

[16] Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), Affordability Report 2020. https://a4ai.org/research/affordability-report/affordability-report-2020/

To be gender responsive, digital policies, strategies, programmes, and projects need to consider the main challenges that prevent women to fully reap the benefits of the opportunities offered by the digital economy. Some of these challenges relate to women's access to digital technologies, digital skills (including also other type of skills such as financial skills), finance, entrepreneurship and leadership, and infrastructure and digital services.

Bringing more girls and young women into the tech sector could spur faster growth of gender-responsive technologies. This, in turn, could open new career paths for women in the field of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and beyond.

ITU led initiatives to increase girls and women participation in the ICT sector

Besides ITU's role as co-founder and host of EQUALS[17], the global partnership to close the gender digital divide, ITU led other initiatives and programmes contributing to this goal such as the international celebration of Girls in ICTs and the gender champions part of the Generation Connect initiative.

International Girls in ICT Day[18]: Observed annually during the last week of April , ITU and partners work together to develop solutions and ideas through this global celebration that includes a global dialogue and celebrations across the regions, plus activities along the year with the main goal of trigger interest of girls in ICTs and open spaces for learning and sharing digital tools. This year the 28 April, the Girls in ICTs was celebrated with a focus on 'Access and Safety' as key elements to engage the next generation with information and communication technology (ICT). The global celebration and associated worldwide Girls in ICT Day events underline ITU's commitment to encourage girls and young women everywhere to consider pursuing STEM career paths.

Gender Champions at Generation Connect Initiative[19]: Generation Connect is the overarching initiative of the ITU Youth Strategy aiming to engage global youth and encourage their participation as equal partners alongside the leaders of today's digital change, empowering young people with the skills and opportunities to advance their vision of a connected future. Twelve outstanding young women (ages 18-24) from developing countries (2 from each ITU region) were nominated and selected as the first group of "Generation Connect Gender Champions" that attended the Generation Connect Global Youth Summit[20] the past June in Kigali, Rwanda. Contributing to the shared goal of gender equality, the Champions facilitated online consultations on youth, gender, and technology. The results of this consultation informed the development and hosting of sessions for other young delegates and policymakers at the Youth Summit in Kigali and also served to co-create plans that empower young women and girls to meaningfully engage with ICTs and STEM.

[17] https://www.equalsintech.org/
[18] https://www.itu.int/women-and-girls/girls-in-ict/
[19] https://www.itu.int/generationconnect/
[20] https://www.itu.int/generationconnect/generation-connect-youth-summit-2022/

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gathering gender-disaggregated data and conducting research to identify areas and gaps to advance gender-equitable access and use of technologies is not isolated from the need of mainstreaming gender in digital policies. Both require collective action and long-term commitments between governments, private sector, and civil society. To that end, ITU fosters new and established partnerships between all relevant sectors, including governments, the private sector, international and regional organizations, and local institutions to achieve the goal of universal and meaningful connectivity. By furthering universal connectivity, more women and girls will gain the access and necessary skills to connect to reliable and safe Internet.

As a result, the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development established in 2010[21], through its working group on the gender digital divide, addressed the barriers preventing women from accessing and using the Internet and developed a comprehensive Broadband Commission Working Group on Digital Gender Divide 2017 report, titled *Recommendations for action bridging the gender gap in internet and broadband access and use*[22]. The report used relevant data on the digital gender gap to determine a baseline of the gender digital divide landscape before setting out actionable recommendations to close the divide. These recommendations helped clarify the complementary roles of different actors, including governments and policymakers, the private sector, inter-governmental organizations, NGOs, and academic and research institutions. Targeted action by a range of stakeholders is required to address the gender gap in Internet access and use. Moreover, as a result of the Broadband Commission working groups in 2016, the EQUALS Global Partnership was created and continues to build multisectoral support for closing the gender digital divide[23].

[21] The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development was established in 2010 by ITU and UNESCO with the aim of boosting the importance of broadband on the international policy agenda and expanding broadband access in every country as key to accelerating progress towards national and international development targets. Led by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Carlos Slim Helù of Mexico, it is co-chaired by ITU's Secretary-General Houlin Zhao and UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. It comprises over 50 Commissioners who represent a cross-cutting group of top CEO and industry leaders, senior policymakers and government representatives, and experts from international agencies, academia and organizations concerned with development. The Commission is recognized for the publication of the annual State of Broadband Report and more than 30 thematic research and advocacy reports addressing such topics as digital health, education, online safety and inclusion of vulnerable populations.

[22] http://broadbandcommission.org/download/2759/

[23] Launched in 2016 by the International Telecommunication Union and four founding partners – GSMA, the International Trade Centre, the United Nations University and UN Women – EQUALS contributes to the UN Sustainable Development Agenda through actions and evidence-based research aimed at closing the global gender digital divide. EQUALS uses a multidisciplinary approach that integrates research, policy and programming to promote gender equality in technology access, skills and leadership, as well as conducting

The recommendations from the Broadband Commission report--which are the outcomes of a collaborative and multi stakeholder process, related primarily to overcoming the barriers women face when accessing and using the Internet and broadband--are the following:

1. Understand the context: sex-disaggregated data on Internet access and use

    a. **Collecting, analyzing, and tracking data:** the collection of robust, reliable, accurate, and timely sex-aggregated data is a crucial step in understanding the gender digital divide and measuring progress in addressing the issue
    b. **Researching women's access to and use of the Internet:** The Working Group calls on stakeholders to research women's access to and use of the Internet to improve understanding of the needs, circumstances, and preferences of women in different local contexts, and the factors limiting women's access to and use of the Internet, including cultural and social norms.
    c. **Publishing and sharing data and research:** The pace of technological development that characterizes ICTs means that flexible and responsive polices and strategies are required which are driven by accurate, up-to-date information that is shared between stakeholders. The Working Group recommends that sex- disaggregated data and research should be published and shared among stakeholders in a safe and secure manner

2. Integrate a gender perspective in strategies, policies, plans and budgets

    a. **Establishing gender equality targets for Internet and broadband access and use:** The integration of gender equality targets and key performance indicators across all Internet-related strategies, policies, plans, projects and budgets is vital to addressing the gender digital divide effectively. The Working Group calls on stakeholders to ensure that ICT/broadband access targets are included in gender equality and other related strategies, policies, plans and budgets. To ensure consistent action and progress, it further recommends that stakeholders should implement clear accountability structures to ensure targets are delivered and women are supported in accessing and using the Internet and broadband.
    b. **Assessing strategies, policies, plans and budgets for gender equality considerations:** Outdated and/or ill-conceived strategies, policies, plans and budgets may hamper initiatives promoting access for women. The Working Group recommends

ground-breaking, evidence-based research. By promoting awareness, building political commitment, leveraging resources and knowledge, harnessing the capacities of partners, and supporting real action – EQUALS seeks to achieve digital gender equality and through this, to improve the livelihoods of millions around the world.

that stakeholders use gender analysis tools to assess and develop strategies, policies, plans and budgets to ensure that gender equality considerations are sufficiently reflected and prioritised

c. **Consulting and involving women as well as relevant local communities and experts:** Women's needs must be at the heart of policy and programme design to overcome all aspects of the digital gender divide. To ensure that policy development is centered on women and their needs in diverse contexts, the Working Group recommends that stakeholders consult and involve women and local communities, gender equality advocates and experts, as well as researchers and relevant NGOs, from the outset in the development of strategies, policies, plans and budgets.

3. Address the barriers

I. Affordable access

a. **Improved understanding of affordability issues:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders investigate the ways in which men and women from diverse population segments are impacted by affordability issues and develop strategies for achieving affordable access based on this understanding.

b. **Innovating to reduce the cost of devices and services:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders work to reduce the cost of devices for accessing the Internet, and of data, so that access becomes more affordable to women, particularly those with lower incomes. This can be supported through policy and regulatory measures, the design of products and services, and technical and/or market innovation.

c. **Improving network coverage, capacity and quality:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders should collaborate and support efforts to increase network coverage, capacity and quality, particularly in underserved areas where a significant proportion of the population are women.

d. **Providing public access facilities:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders should support and invest in the provision of safe and accessible public access facilities to serve women.

e. Addressing threats that prevent access and use: **Researching and understanding threats:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders conduct research on the threats pertaining to women's ICT use, as well as cultural and social norms, that prevent women from accessing and using the Internet in different regions and social and cultural contexts.

f. **Increasing awareness of threats and how they can be addressed or reduced:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders make use of awareness campaigns, digital literacy programmes and/or formal education programmes/ curricula to raise awareness of the threats that prevent women from accessing and using the Internet, and how they can be addressed or reduced.

g. **Developing safety applications and services:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders invest in applications and services that make it safer for women to access and use the Internet, while addressing issues of harassment, abuse and violence

h. **Strengthening protection measures and reporting procedures:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders strengthen measures to protect women against ICT-mediated abuse and harassment; including through legal and policy frameworks that recognise and address ICT-mediated abuse, harassment and fraud, and through measures that promote and simplify access to justice

II. Digital literacy and confidence:

i. **Understanding women's needs:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders ensure that digital literacy and capacity-building initiatives consider women's needs, interests and local contexts in order to encourage strategic and meaningful use of the Internet

j. **Investing in education and capacity-building initiatives:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders invest in public education and capacity-building initiatives that pay particular attention to increasing women's digital literacy and confidence, including women across all levels of education, income, and familiarity with ICTs and the Internet.

k. **Developing skills and confidence:** The Working Group recommends that stakeholders should support the development of online content and services that are accessible to women with limited literacy, language and ICT-related skills, and confidence; and should ensure that women with lower literacy levels are included in the pilots and user testing of these services, including online government content and services.

l. **Supporting educators:** The Working Group recommends that educators, teachers and local leaders should be trained to use tools and understand the benefits of delivering digital skills training to women in their communities; that stakeholders should invest in pre- and in-service training of teachers and educators to support their ongoing learning

and development; and that the number of female teachers of ICT across all levels of education should be increased.

m. **Supporting and promoting female role models:** The Working Group recommends that female role models should be promoted as leaders and Internet users within communities and amongst staff in decision-making positions.

III. Relevant content, applications, and services

n. **Building awareness:** Since a lack of perceived value can be a barrier to Internet access and use, the Working Group recommends that stakeholders help raise awareness of the potential benefits that can be achieved through women's access to and use of Internet-enabled content, applications, and services.

o. **Developing relevant content and services:** To ensure women can benefit from the development of relevant content and services, and can also participate in their production, the Working Group recommends that stakeholders encourage and participate in the development of an ecosystem of quality, non- stereotypical services, applications, and content relevant to women which are designed with an understanding of women's wants and needs.

p. **Consulting and engaging women:** A better understanding of the wants and needs of diverse groups of women, as distinct from men, will help stakeholders improve the relevance of content, applications, and services to women's needs. The Working Group recommends that stakeholders involve women from diverse backgrounds, including those in low income groups and those who do not currently make use of ICTs, in the design, testing and iteration of content, applications, and services.

4. Work together and share good practice and lessons

a. **Develop and share tools, guidelines, case studies and other materials** which can support national and international efforts to address the digital gender gap

b. **Support and encourage multi-stakeholder cooperation** and sharing of expertise in national and international efforts to address the digital gender gap.

The Commission set seven 2025 Broadband Advocacy Targets which are monitored presenting the progress of broadband adoption and acceleration of digital inclusion with one dedicated target 7 on gender equality. The Commission reports on the Targets in its flagship State of Broadband Report annually. In 2022, the State of Broadband titled: *Accelerating Broadband for New Realities* figures

suggested the setback and the progress has now stalled across LMICs and in some countries the mobile Internet gender gap has even increased.

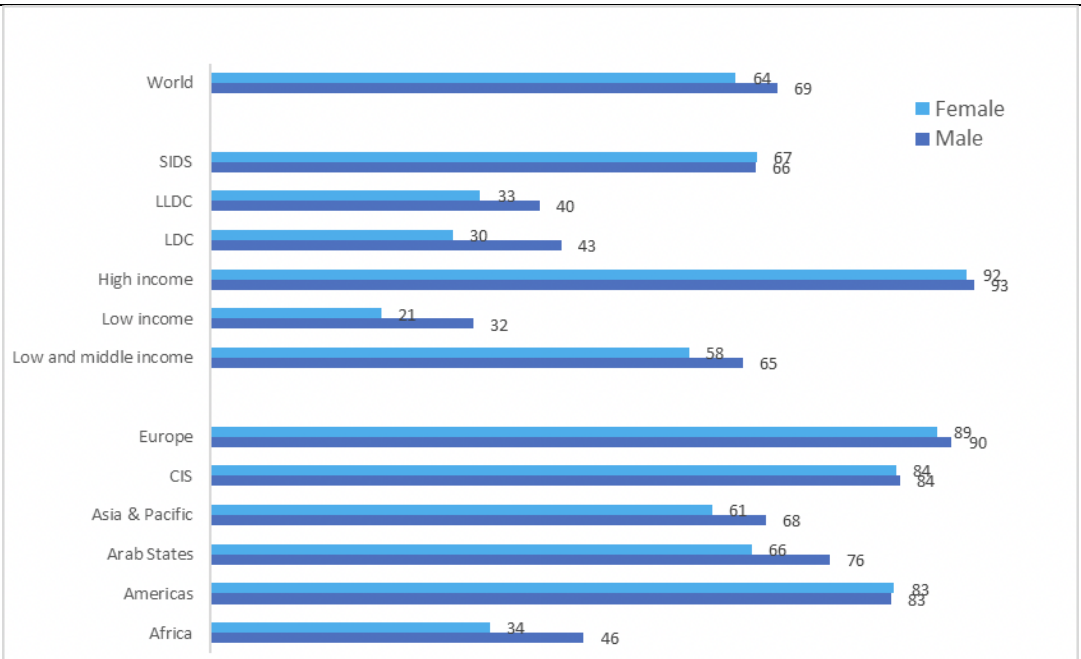
Broadband Commission Advocacy Target 7 Achieving gender equality in access to broadband by 2025: By 2025, gender equality should be achieved across all targets

According to the latest ITU estimates, 69 per cent of men were using the Internet in 2022 compared to 63 per cent of women. Gender parity increased from 0.89 in 2018 to 0.92 in 2020. Some regions and income groups have reached gender parity in Internet use including high-income countries, SIDS, the Americas, CIS countries and Europe. However, notable gender gaps in mobile Internet access persist in LMICs. The substantial gender gap in mobile Internet use in LMICs had been improving, driven primarily by South Asia where it decreased significantly from 67 per cent in 2017 to 36 per cent in 2020, according to GSMA. However, this progress has now stalled across LMICs and in some countries the mobile Internet gender gap has even increased.

As reported by GSMA, women were 16 per cent less likely than men to use mobile Internet across LMICs in 2021 By comparison, this gender gap was 15 per cent the year before, and prior to that it had reduced every year from 25 per cent in 2017. While more women continue to use the Internet than ever before, and it remains the primary way most people access the Internet in LMICs, their rate of adoption has slowed over the last year. Furthermore, in some countries, men's rates of mobile Internet adoption has been higher than that of women's, driving an increase in the mobile Internet gender gap.

Similar to the story we have seen in mobile Internet use, the gender gap in smartphone ownership had been reducing year-on-year across LMICs—from 20 per cent in 2017 to 16 per cent in 2020—but over the last year this has reversed. Women are currently 18 per cent less likely than men to own a smartphone. These gender gaps also exist in women's access to and use of mobile money services, which are helping drive financial inclusion for women, can increase their economic independence, and strengthen their role as financial decision- makers. It is important to also ensure that women can access and use mobile money on par with men.

Significant gender gaps remain at other levels of the ICT value chain. Among the world's leading tech companies, just 23 per cent of women were engaged in roles such as software development and engineering, and women represented only 26 per cent of board members in 2020.



Source: ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission based on ITU data
https://www.broadbandcommission.org/publication/state-of-broadband-2022/

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

By enabling a policy environment with a meaningful gender lens, as well as promoting digital skills strategies and policies that are inclusive, policymakers can help ensure women's and girls' access and use of ICTs at full potential. ITU will soon release a *Handbook on gender mainstreaming in digital policies*[24] with practical information; practices per region on countries that mainstream gender in policies; plans and programmes; assessing existing policies; and creating strategies for women and girls at the national level. The handbook also offers an initial actionable checklist for policymakers that includes the following:

1. **Gather data and conduct research**
    - Gather gender disaggregated data and conduct research to identify areas where women are at disadvantage vis-à-vis men.
    - Use surveys to understand the current situation of gender in digital.
    - Gather information about existing similar projects and programmes – remove overlaps and promote synergies.

2. **Define a gender mainstreaming practice**

[24] ITU/EQUALS/EIF. "Handbook on mainstreaming gender in digital policies" (to be released in 2022)

- Structure practice by defining objective, activities and governance.
- Consider that a practice can address more than one policy area.
- Identify similar gender mainstreaming practices from concerned regions or elsewhere and take on board lessons learned from those practices.

3. Align the practice with national strategic documents

- Ensure the practice is aligned with the objectives of the overarching national ICT policy or Master Plan.
- Ensure the practice is aligned with national strategic documents that guide work on other policy areas such as the National Strategy on Financial Inclusion; the National Education Strategy; the National Energy Plan, etc.
- If a national strategic document does not exist, promote the adoption of one that includes a dedicated chapter or section stating concrete actions to support women and girls.

4. Allocate resources

- Budget: Define a specific budget for the implementation of the gender mainstreaming practice.
- Staff: for some logistical tasks, consider relying on resources of institutions such as the national post office with offices in different parts of the country.
- Develop tools to help partners align with a gender mainstreaming strategy or policy.

5. Identify focal points in key government institutions and consult with stakeholders

- Identify gender focal points in dedicated Ministries.
- Discuss the practice with gender focal points in other government institutions. Check UN Women's Directory of National Mechanisms for Gender Equality.[25]
- Consult with stakeholders that will be affected by the practice and with other stakeholders such as business representatives, civil society organisations, regional regulatory associations, and international organisations.
- Get official support to the practice.

[25] UN WOMEN (2021), Directory of national mechanisms for gender equality, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Partnerships/NationalMechanisms/Directory-of-National-Mechanisms-en.pdf

- Actively communicate with stakeholders and campaign about the practice by, for instance, sending formal letters to Ministries, or organizing gender mainstreaming workshops.

6. Collaborate and partner with other government institutions and stakeholders

- Identify institutionalized coordination mechanisms in place relating addressing gender in digital policies.
- If such mechanism does not exist, consult bilaterally with gender focal points from relevant Ministries and other government agencies. Identify dedicated committees.
- Establish partnerships with key stakeholders for the practice implementation.
- Engage with partners at different levels – local, bilateral, multilateral, and private sector and NGOs.
- Maintain regular communication with all government institutions and other stakeholders and provide timely support throughout implementation.

7. Measure impact

- Establish a framework to measure effectiveness of practices.
- Identify areas where there is room for improvement.
- Identify lessons learned for replication and scalability.

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