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# 10 Lessons Learnt: Closing the Gender Gap in Internet Access and Use

Insights from the  
EQUALS Access  
Coalition

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# EQUALS

## About EQUALS

In 2016, ITU, the GSMA, UN Women, United Nations University (UNU) and the International Trade Centre (ITC), launched EQUALS, the Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age. EQUALS is a multi-stakeholder initiative that brings together international organisations, the private sector, government agencies, civil society organisations, and academia to address the growing digital gender divide.



## About the Access Coalition

The Access Coalition led by the GSMA focuses on reducing the gender gap in internet access and use to empower women and reduce inequality. Through its activities, the Access coalition aims to increase women's access to and use of the internet in countries where targeted action has been taken by EQUALS partners and to share insights and evidence based case studies which provide examples of how to increase women's access to and use of the internet.

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The internet has made communication quicker and easier, information more easily available, businesses more efficient, and education, entertainment and public services more accessible than ever before. According to the ITU, more than half of the world's population is now connected to the internet<sup>1</sup>. Internet connectivity is not, however, equitable and the gender gap persists. For example, the latest estimates from the ITU suggest that women globally are 12% less likely than men to have internet access<sup>2</sup>. They also highlight that this gap is most pronounced in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), where women are 33% less likely to use the internet and where only one in every seven women uses the internet compared with one in every five men.

EQUALS Access Coalition Partners have taken a leading role in closing the gender gap in access to and use of the internet, and they have learned key lessons along the way. In this report, you will find some invaluable insights to consider when implementing projects that aim to increase women's access to and use of the internet.

<sup>1</sup> Press Release: "ITU releases 2018 global and regional ICT estimates", ITU, 2008. Available at [www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR40.aspx](http://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR40.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> "ICT Facts and Figures 2017", ITU, 2017. Available at [www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf)

## 1

## Including women in all aspects of the initiative, from design to delivery, ensures it meets their needs and helps empower women

Consulting and involving women in all aspects of the initiative including in the design, implementation, piloting, marketing and implementation is key.

The World Bank Group Digital Development Global Practice's Digital Jobs in Nigeria programme has taken this principle on board and is now rolling out six-month training on digital entrepreneurship to 180 Northern Nigerian youths in Kaduna. This project covers training from ideation to market stage, with the curriculum including training in entrepreneurship, soft skills (communication, negotiation, pitching), provision of access to a mentor's network (heavy focus on Northern Nigerian mentors) and training on how to access sources of capital.

Encouraging women to be content creators – not just content consumers – will also lead to the development of more relevant content, therefore encouraging more women to get online. The World Bank's Digital Jobs in Nigeria Programme is also implementing a six month digital skills development programme to equip 180 Northern Nigerian youth in Kaduna with global industry related digital skills (tech and programming, digital marketing and graphic design) and link them with work opportunities both online and in person. At least 50% of the 180 participants are women; in an effort to not only combat the increasing gender divide but also economically empower Nigerian women. In July 2018, The Digital Jobs in Nigeria programme also trained 940 unemployed youths (over 50% women) on accessing jobs through freelancing platforms in partnership with Upwork and other local Nigerian freelancing platforms. Online work is particularly essential in Fragile Conflict Violent Zones like Kaduna which have struggling economies and high youth unemployment.

The APC (Association for Progressive Communications) established that having women trainers, and gender representation and equality in deployment of technology is beneficial and creates safer spaces for women to be integrated as trainees and as early adopters of technology. The World Bank's Digital Jobs in Nigeria initiative also found that gender separate classes and female local trainers were essential to the success and sustainability of programmes targeting women users, and highlighted the importance of these trainers being upskilled as part of the design. This is why, as part of their Digital Jobs programme, at least 50% of participants totalling 180 are women are being trained in a women only cohort and equipped with much needed soft skills.



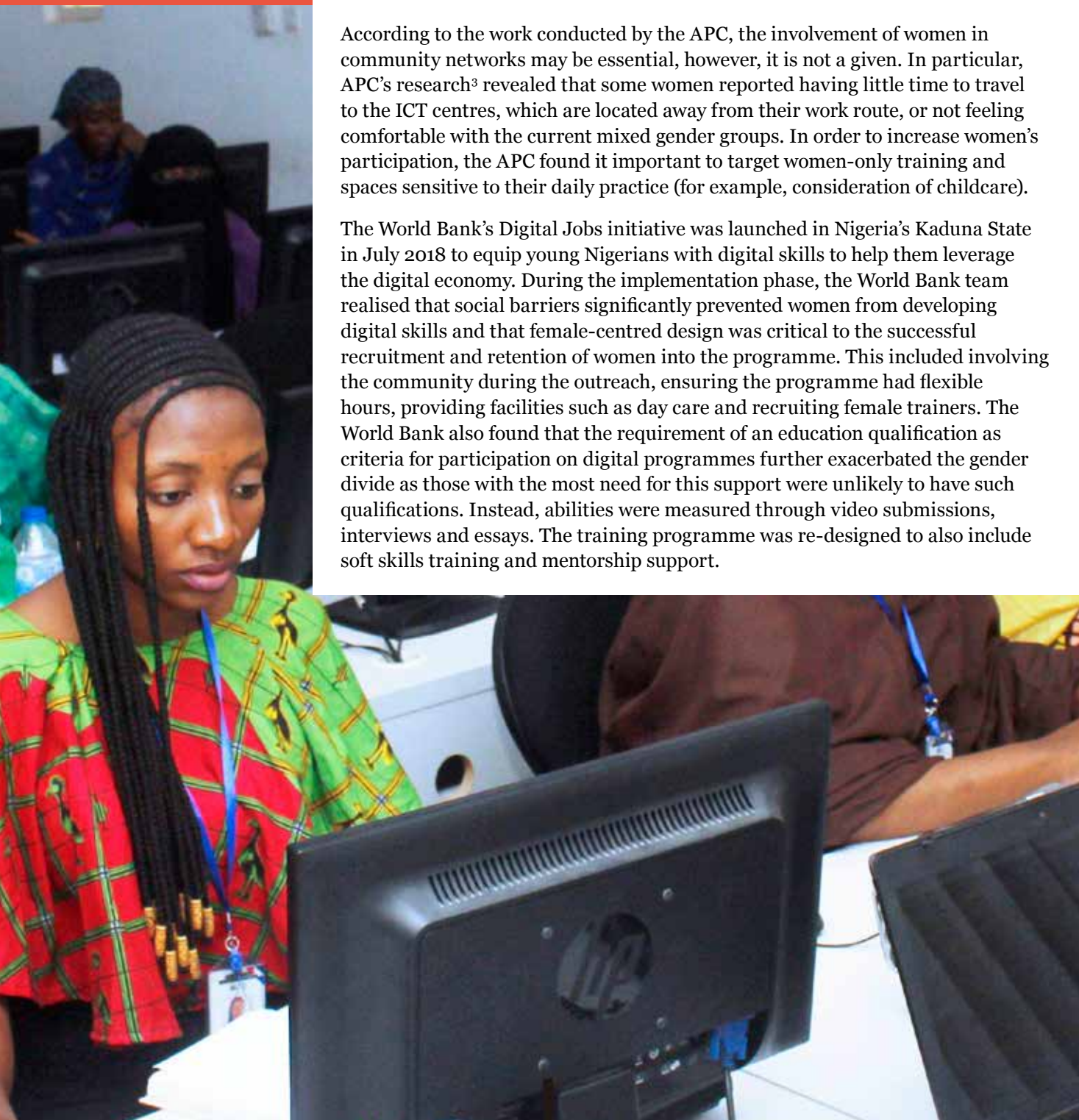


## 2

## Social norms should be taken into consideration to lower the barriers for women to access and use the internet

According to the work conducted by the APC, the involvement of women in community networks may be essential, however, it is not a given. In particular, APC's research<sup>3</sup> revealed that some women reported having little time to travel to the ICT centres, which are located away from their work route, or not feeling comfortable with the current mixed gender groups. In order to increase women's participation, the APC found it important to target women-only training and spaces sensitive to their daily practice (for example, consideration of childcare).

The World Bank's Digital Jobs initiative was launched in Nigeria's Kaduna State in July 2018 to equip young Nigerians with digital skills to help them leverage the digital economy. During the implementation phase, the World Bank team realised that social barriers significantly prevented women from developing digital skills and that female-centred design was critical to the successful recruitment and retention of women into the programme. This included involving the community during the outreach, ensuring the programme had flexible hours, providing facilities such as day care and recruiting female trainers. The World Bank also found that the requirement of an education qualification as criteria for participation on digital programmes further exacerbated the gender divide as those with the most need for this support were unlikely to have such qualifications. Instead, abilities were measured through video submissions, interviews and essays. The training programme was re-designed to also include soft skills training and mentorship support.



<sup>3</sup> Nicola Bidwell and Michael Jensen, "Bottom-Up Connectivity Strategies: Community-led small-scale telecommunication infrastructure networks in the global South", APC, 2019. Available at [www.apc.org/en/pubs/bottom-connectivity-strategies-community-led-small-scale-telecommunication-infrastructure](http://www.apc.org/en/pubs/bottom-connectivity-strategies-community-led-small-scale-telecommunication-infrastructure)

## 3

### Effective initiatives around internet access can also have a positive effect on social norms, leading to greater empowerment of women in their communities

Trickle Up partnered with TATA Communications to launch the M-Powered programme in India, which, in its first phase, targeted over 1,700 women in Odisha and Jharkhand. The livelihoods aspect of their programme was delivered or supported by the provision of mobile phones, training and a specially designed app called the PoP. The PoP app enables illiterate and indigenous women to better track, manage and learn about agricultural practices and financial services using materials that are adapted and/or translated for mostly illiterate populations who speak tribal languages.

As part of this initiative, women called “Smart Sakhis” were selected from their communities to be local trainers and coaches for their peers who use the app, spreading its influence and impact. During the final year of the programme, 76% of project participants graduated with technological literacy and went on to become Smart Sakhis within their programme communities. In total, the programme educated 69 Smart Sakhis and collectively trained an additional 2,500 women.

Interestingly, this initiative has had an impact on social norms by changing the status of women in the household: 60% of participants are the primary users of the smartphone within their household, with some women reporting that their husbands have asked them to train them on agricultural techniques using the PoP.





## 4

**Initiatives aimed at increasing women's access to the internet should be holistic in nature and take into account all barriers around access including lack of accessibility, affordability and relevance, low levels of digital skills and concerns around safety and security**

The Digital Ambassador Programme (DAP) is an ambitious national programme, led by Rwanda's Ministry of Information Technology and Communications (MITEC) and implemented by the Digital Opportunity Trust to increase the digital literacy of five million Rwandan citizens, and their resulting access and use of online systems and services.

An evaluation of the programme's pilot phase highlighted the importance of addressing the range of barriers women face including accessibility, affordability, skills and safety considerations.

For many Rwandan female citizens, access to affordable internet was recognised as one of the main barriers to internet usage. Specifically, the cost of data bundles and/or cost of access to devices were prohibitively expensive for a large number of potential female users in the rural areas.

Furthermore, the evaluation found that a lack of locally relevant content excluded yet more women from becoming digital users. The relevance barrier was particularly pertinent for female users.

Another barrier, which disproportionately affected women, relates to social norms. Socio-cultural challenges that women faced include a lack of appreciation for women's training schedules and the impact of training on their day-to-day activities.

The Rwanda Digital Ambassador Programme (R-DAP) has taken active steps to address the learnings from the study and has improved its delivery model. Moreover, with the support of Mozilla and Girl Effect, the Digital Ambassadors established female only Citizen Digital Community Clubs. This programme offered a safe space for women to engage in continuous peer-to-peer learning, share devices to practice their newly acquired digital skills, expand their networks and develop group savings and loans to support the acquisition of mobile phones and the growth of small businesses.





## 5

## Targeted marketing campaigns are needed to increase women's adoption of the internet and its benefits

Lack of awareness of the internet and of its benefits remains a challenge for many women. According to a large-scale consumer survey conducted by the GSMA, women in low- and middle-income countries have lower awareness of mobile internet than men (75% of women are aware of mobile internet, compared to 83% of men)<sup>4</sup>.

Above-the-line (ATL) marketing campaigns combined with below-the-line activities on the ground are important to raise customers' awareness of internet products and services and of their value to them. Ensuring that women can relate to an ATL campaign is an important step in driving adoption uptake of the service. For example, featuring women in ATL campaigns can make the service more appealing to the female market. It is also important to ensure that ATL campaigns are visible in locations frequented most often by women and/or at times when women are most likely to see them. In addition, mobile operators have employed targeted, below-the-line advertising through initiatives such as bulk SMS, in order to reach more women customers.

Finally, the World Bank's DDP programme found that taking steps such as involving the community during the outreach phase would go a long way towards attracting and retaining female participation for digital programmes.

## 6

## Do not underestimate the need for basic digital skills

In Bolivia, Pro Mujer is collaborating with CISCO Networking Academy and the Women Speed Up Foundation to train women on advanced computer and internet skills within a three-year period. The goal of this initiative is to support women in advancing their basic internet knowledge and to give them access to increased job opportunities. However, a large number of women involved in the programme lacked basic working knowledge of computers. To address this challenge, Pro Mujer adjusted their strategy and decided to first focus on basic digital skills, and then introduce more advanced modules and use cases. Today, 40,000 women have successfully completed Cybersecurity and Get Connected courses.

In Nicaragua, Pro Mujer has provided financial literacy trainings to female entrepreneurs, leveraging their Pro Mujer mobile application. However, the team quickly realised that many women did not have email accounts to subscribe to and download the app. As a result, Pro Mujer developed informative campaigns in order to encourage clients to create their own email addresses and improve their digital literacy. As of now, more than 50% of Pro Mujer's beneficiaries in Nicaragua have been trained in basic digital literacy, including email, device use, internet management, Facebook and Pro Mujer mobile applications.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Rowntree, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019", GSMA, 2019. Available at [www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019](http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019)

## 7

## Cost of access to the internet remains a major challenge for many women

In Nicaragua, Pro Mujer is providing connectivity in Pro Mujer centres to allow their beneficiaries to access the internet. In these centres, the programme also teaches beneficiaries digital skills, including how to use applications to improve their businesses. In hindsight, smartphone sharing appeared to be a key challenge. Indeed, the fact that many women don't own their smartphone but have to share it with others leads to competition for storage and space on the phone for apps, photos, etc. To address this challenge, Pro Mujer now plans to offer a new loan product to finance cell phone purchases for their clients in Nicaragua.

Similarly, in Rwanda, affordability was identified to be a major challenge for women's access to the internet. Despite 4G networks reaching 90% of the population, the costs of smartphones and data bundles remain prohibitive for many low-income women and mobile internet.

According to the GSMA, affordability is the number one barrier to mobile phone ownership for women in low- and middle-income countries.









## 8

## Internet-related safety concerns should be addressed to ensure that women can safely access and use the internet

The IGF-em (Female Internet Governance) is an initiative backed by Internet Society Special Interest Group for Women (SIG Women) that aims to create safe spaces for women who access and use the internet in the Global South. The key objective of the initiative is to create safe spaces for women where they can reflect and exchange information and tools to access and navigate the internet safely. The initiative has demonstrated that the challenges that women face in accessing and securely navigating the internet vary depending on their local context. However, they also realised that women consistently ask for tools and information that help them stay protected online.

The lack of infrastructure such as public lights and safer roads, which are essential for women's ability to get to public access points, has been a challenge observed by the APC. Moreover, the APC found that the male surveillance of shared devices can significantly restrain women's meaningful and free access to the internet.

GSMA research<sup>5</sup> highlights that while mobile phones can increase safety for women, safety concerns are also a significant barrier to owning a mobile phone and using the internet. Not only is it important to consider online safety and security concerns, we must also address safety concerns for women related to the physical spaces they go to in order to access the internet. Mobile operators are helping to address these safety and harassment concerns through a range of strategies and services such as anonymous top-up services, education and awareness initiatives, and through ensuring that points of sale are more approachable for women<sup>6</sup>.



<sup>5</sup> Oliver Rowntree, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019", GSMA, 2019. Available at [www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019](http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019)

<sup>6</sup> Helen Croxson and Amber Wilson, "A framework to understand women's mobile-related safety concerns", GSMA, 2018. Available at [www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/a-framework-to-understand-womens-mobile-related-safety-concerns-in-low-and-middle-income-countries](http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/a-framework-to-understand-womens-mobile-related-safety-concerns-in-low-and-middle-income-countries)



## 9

## Delivery of digital inclusion programmes at scale will necessitate multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral collaboration

R-DAP is an example of a successful multi-stakeholder partnership ecosystem that spans public, private and civil society sectors. Assembling a robust partnership ecosystem spanning the public, private and civil society sectors has been crucial to R-DAP's implementation and success. Several EQUALS members have been engaged in the first two phases of R-DAP, including GIZ, the GSMA, the Mozilla Foundation, Web Foundation, World Economic Forum, Next 3B, Girl Effect, IREMBO, Rwanda Information Society Agency (RISA), as well as other partners such as the Canadian government. Strong engagement of Rwanda partners, in particular local government and e-organisations such as Rwanda Online, is driving local ownership and sustainability.

Furthermore, as part of the National Dialogues initiatives, the GSMA has been gathering key government ministries (ICT, finance, planning, gender, energy, agriculture, health, etc.), mobile industry leadership and consumer insights to demonstrate how mobile can be a positive force for societal change and build a collective vision to deliver on this opportunity.

## 10

## Data is key to establish targets and track the adoption and use of the internet among women and effectively monitor the impact of initiatives

The absence of accurate gender-disaggregated data is a consistent barrier to measuring, evaluating and ultimately resolving gender issues. For example, the evaluation of the effectiveness of the R-DAP drew attention to the importance of the need to conduct a robust, longitudinal evidence study to link digital access and use to economic development. While the R-DAP programme demonstrates self-reported and anecdotal evidence of positive shifts in household income stability and resilience, it lacks the robust systems for measuring long-term impacts; in particular, the impact of digital uptake on micro- and macro-economic development.

The lack of complete and accurate sex-disaggregated data has also been a challenge observed by the GSMA. To support efforts to close the digital gender gap by the mobile industry, the GSMA developed the Gender Identification and Analysis Toolkit (GAIT) to allow operators to estimate the gender of their subscribers on an individual, MSISDN-level. The information gap the toolkit addresses is an important one; understanding the nature and scale of the mobile gender gap is a prerequisite for closing it. GAIT is a machine learning algorithm that analyses mobile usage patterns to estimate the gender of subscribers. In the course of its development, GAIT was piloted in Bangladesh in partnership with Robi Axiata. GAIT reached close to 85% accuracy in identifying women in Robi's base, allowing the operator to reach potential female customers in a more effective manner.





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