

# THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

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There is a significant, global, digital divide that limits girls' and women's opportunities in our increasingly digital world. In low and middle-income countries, only 58% of women use mobile internet, with around 234 million fewer women having access than men.<sup>1</sup> The gender gap in mobile internet use is 37% in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup>

## THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

For CONCORD the digital gender gap covers 3 main elements: access, use, and creation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

Women and girls face specific barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying the opportunities offered by the digital transformation. These barriers arise from a variety of sources, including a lack of digital skills, affordability barriers, inaccessibility and online harassment often resulting from entrenched negative gender norms and stereotypes. Such obstacles are compounded by multi-dimensional and intersectional inequalities, such as socio-economic status,

income level, education level, age, location (rural/urban setting), disability, migration status, etc. For example, women with disabilities have the lowest levels of mobile internet usage and mobile ownership worldwide<sup>3</sup>. They also face additional challenges when digital accessibility is not ensured for persons with disabilities (for example, as users of screen readers).

This digital exclusion has a number of effects. Digital illiteracy and barriers in access to mobile phones and the internet limits women's and girls' access to information and learning. Lack of digital skills, in turn, affects their employability. Girls and women have to fight strong stereotypes in the male-dominated ICT sector which can influence whether they pursue a career in this sector.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, this has an impact on the devices and content developed, which are mostly produced by men and often do not reflect the needs of women and girls. On the contrary, they may even contribute to the reproduction of gender biases and inequality, as has already been observed through the gender bias inherent in artificial intelligence.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to ensure that we do not only strengthen the ability of girls and women to access and use technology and digital content, but to design, develop and create it as well. Closing the digital gender divide through a gender transformative and intersectional approach is important if the EU is to achieve its objective of promoting gender equality

<sup>1</sup> GSMA, *The Mobile Gender Gap Report*, 2021

<sup>2</sup> GSMA, *The Mobile Gender Gap Report*, 2021

<sup>3</sup> Clara Aranda Jan & Matt Shanahan, *The digital divide at the intersection of gender and disability*, 2020

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, 2021

<sup>5</sup> See for example: UNESCO, *I'd Blush if I could think piece 2*, 2019; or UNESCO, *Artificial Intelligence and Gender Equality*, 2020

worldwide, as stated in the Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025).<sup>6</sup> The achievement of gender equality is essential to promote a digital transformation that leaves no one behind, and digital tools can play a crucial facilitation role in this process.

This paper presents CONCORD's recommendations for the EU's digital and development policies and initiatives, along four key priority areas: connectivity, digital literacy and skills, online safety and gender norms. These must go hand-in-hand to bridge the digital gender divide and ensure girls and women thrive in a digital world. The paper provides a basis to inform the EU's human-centered approach, with a focus on gender, as it is applied to different policy processes and initiatives such as the external dimension of Europe's Digital Decade, the digital pillar of the EU's Communication: Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa, and the work of the Digital for Development Hub.

## CONNECTIVITY

Girls and women everywhere should be able to connect to the internet and use devices which are accessible and affordable. Infrastructure planning and development to ensure access to the internet for everyone is key to closing the digital divide, including the digital gender divide. However, it is only effective if gender is mainstreamed throughout: using gender-sensitive and inclusive planning, we can ensure that digital infrastructure will contribute to socio-economic development, reach areas where women live (especially remote and rural areas), and respond to the needs of women and the specific challenges they face in their access to the internet.

While the absence of infrastructure is the most basic challenge in ensuring broad internet access, according to GSMA's 2021 Connected Women report, cost is among the top three barriers to girls and women using mobile phone internet<sup>7</sup> and most likely one of the reasons contributing to their owning more basic devices, with fewer functionalities. Women are 15% less likely than men to own a smartphone.<sup>8</sup> According to recent research by the Alliance for Affordable Internet, "the average affordability of a 2GB package currently stands at 5.8% and a 5GB package is priced at 10.1% of average monthly income. This puts them out of reach for the vast majority of people".<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations to the EU

- Integrate a gender analysis using an intersectional approach and disaggregated data in digital infrastructure planning in order to ensure that it is gender-sensitive and inclusive.
- Engage women and girls and civil society, to effectively and meaningfully respond to specific gaps and needs in infrastructure.
- Support net neutrality, the development of local and community networks, and investments in the development of local internet exchange points (IXPs) to help reduce the cost of connectivity.
- Ensure that the connection is reliable: fast enough, and unfettered, so that girls and women are able to use it.

### DESIGNING DIGITAL TOOLS WITH THE USER: ENGAGING WITH WOMEN, GIRLS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In order to ensure that women and girls can shape and participate in the digital transformation, it is crucial to consult them. Whether it comes to policy-making or designing new tools and e-services, women, girls, and women's organisations should be given the space to share what they need from technology and the internet, how they use it, and what currently prevents them from doing so. This is necessary to understand why girls and women are currently ill-equipped to take full advantage of ICTs and the internet, and in order to create effective and meaningful solutions to break these barriers together with them. Only through active participation can digital tools and services become accessible and sufficiently tailored to benefit the whole of society.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The EU's own [GAP III](#) defines a gender-transformative approach as "examining, questioning, and changing rigid gender norms and imbalances of power which disadvantage women and girls and generate discriminations at all ages [...]. This means the EU promoting change in social attitudes, including by actively engaging men and boys and by putting a focus on young people as drivers of change". In the GAP III, the intersectional approach consists in addressing intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination.

<sup>7</sup> The other two are digital skills and online safety, also addressed in this paper: GSMA, [Connected Women - The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2021](#)

<sup>8</sup> GSMA, [Connected Women - The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2021](#)

<sup>9</sup> Alliance for Affordable Internet, [Mobile data costs fall but as demand for internet services surges, progress remains too slow, 2021](#)

<sup>10</sup> GSMA, [Connected Women - The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2021](#)



## DIGITAL LITERACY AND SKILLS

Girls and women in all their diversity must have equal access to learning basic digital literacy and relevant technical skills in school and through training programmes. This will have a number of effects. Firstly, it will allow them to benefit from e-governance and e-services and enable their active participation in our increasingly digital society. Secondly, it will enlarge their career opportunities as well as support diversity in the tech sector. Finally, it will allow them to enjoy equally and be key drivers of the digital transformation, as creators of digital tech and content. Diversity is crucial to harness the power of technology to create solutions that work for all, and to help ensure that the digital systems we rely on are safe and inclusive.

### Recommendations to the EU

- Support partner countries to mainstream digital literacy in national school curricula and actively promote girls' participation in Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, so that they can benefit from the knowledge and skills necessary to set them up for the future.
- Put greater emphasis on how advanced digital skills education can be tailored to increase women participation. This would help to address the acute gender disparities in this domain and women's underrepresentation in the tech ecosystem as ICT professionals. To this end, strategies could include introducing female-only training programmes and awareness-raising initiatives, bringing in female role models from the ICT sector.
- Take into consideration and challenge negative social norms and gender-based discrimination in EU support to and partnership with countries around the world, civil society organisations, private sector actors and communities. Such efforts will help to inspire girls to pursue ICT and STEM topics at school, and women to work in the ICT sector. One way of achieving this is to promote role models and mentors. It is also important to involve men and boys in efforts to challenge negative norms and stereotypes.
- Support lifelong learning opportunities and reskilling, which are necessary in order to adapt to rapid technological change and the automation of work, and to fully take part in the digital economy. These opportunities should adopt a gender and disability sensitive approach to ensure they are accessible to women (e.g. consider childcare, transportation, safe spaces).



## ONLINE SAFETY

Online safety is a major barrier to girls' and women's participation in the online space. Sexism and online harassment against women and girls (as well as LGBTIQ+ people and people of diverse gender identities and expression) is widespread and difficult to report owing to a lack of adequate mechanisms to control or prevent it. Such behaviour silences women and girls online and can force them out of digital spaces, further limiting their ability to take advantage of the internet and digital tools and to fully participate in a digital world.

When girls and women do not have access to a device or a connection of their own, they might be reluctant to access computer classes and internet cafés, because these spaces are often dominated by men or they are located in places that are not accessible to women.

### Recommendations to the EU

- Support education and training programmes alongside digital literacy and skills training so that girls and women can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be safe online. Such programmes should specifically target girls and women, in locations accessible to them. It is also important to involve men and boys in these efforts.



## GENDER NORMS

This priority area is connected to all of the above and a prominent element in the EU's Gender Action Plan III. Gender norms, often rooted in wider cultural and societal beliefs, heavily restrict girls' and women's access to technology by reinforcing the idea that technology is not for girls, that girls and women are unsafe online, and that it is inappropriate for girls and women to use technology or go on the internet.

Furthermore, technology can contribute to reinforcing gender norms and inequality. This is particularly the case with Artificial Intelligence (AI), which has been shown to reproduce gender and racial bias due to lack of diversity in the ICT sector.<sup>11</sup> This is of great concern since automated decision systems employing AI are increasingly used around the world for different purposes, such as determining credit worthiness or selecting candidates for job interviews. In its White Paper on Artificial Intelligence, the European Commission states that while AI can support the achievement of the SDGs, "international cooperation on AI matters must be based on an approach that promotes the respect of fundamental rights, including human dignity, pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination and protection of privacy and personal data".<sup>12</sup> We welcome this approach.

## Recommendations to the EU

- Support transparency and accountability for algorithmic systems, and promote a human rights-based and gender-responsive approach to global governance on AI. (See also our recommendations on digital skills and representation in the ICT sector above.)
- Ensure that policies on digital matters take into consideration the specific challenges girls and women face in a digital world in order for digitalisation to have a transformative effect for gender equality. This means identifying the impacts of gender norms and addressing them explicitly. It also includes promoting change in social attitudes and behaviours about gender, technology and the internet by actively engaging men and boys.

<sup>11</sup> SSIR, Genevieve Smith & Ishita Rustagi, *When Good Algorithms Go Sexist: Why and How to Advance AI Gender Equity*, 2021

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence - A European approach to excellence and trust*, 2020

# RESOURCES

## From CONCORD Europe:

- DSW & IPPF European Network, [How digitalisation and sexual and reproductive health and rights can strengthen one another](#), 2020
- Plan International, [Free to be?](#), 2020 and [Time to act - let's go digital](#), 2021
- CONCORD Europe, [Digitalisation and NDICI Programming](#), 2020
- CONCORD Europe contributions & [reaction](#) to the EU Gender Action Plan III, 2020

## Other resources:

- Association for Progressive Communications, [Bottom-up Connectivity Strategies: Community-led, small-scale telecommunication infrastructure networks in the global South](#), 2020
- Girl Effect & Vodafone Foundation, [Real girls, real lives, connected](#), 2018
- GSMA, [The Mobile Gender Gap Report](#), 2021
- ITU, [Coding Bootcamps: A strategy for youth employment](#), 2016
- ITU, [Digital Skills Insights 2020](#)
- The Internet Society, [Policy Brief: Internet Exchange Points \(IXPs\)](#), 2015
- UN [General Comment 25](#) on Children's Rights in relation to the Digital Environment
- UNCTAD, [Least developed countries suffer digital divide in mobile connectivity](#), 2021
- UNESCO, [Artificial Intelligence and Gender Equality - Key findings of UNESCO's Global Dialogue](#), 2020

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# OUR MEMBERS

<p><b>NATIONAL PLATFORMS</b></p>	<p><b>Global Responsibility</b> Austrian Platform for Development and Humanitarian Aid</p>	<p>BELGISCH PLATFORM PLATE-FORME BELGE <b>CONCORD</b> CNCOD-11.11.11 ACODEV 11.11.11 ngo-coöperatie</p>	<p><b>BPID</b> Bulgarian Platform for International Development</p>	<p>Platforma za međunarodnu građansku solidarnost Hrvatske Croatian Platform for International Citizens Solidarity <b>CROSOL</b></p>	<p><b>CYINDEP</b> Cyprus Island wide NGO Development Platform</p>	<p><b>FORS</b></p>
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<p><b>ZAGRANICA</b></p>	<p><b>ONGD</b> PLATAFORMA PORTUGUESA</p>	<p><b>FOND</b> Federalni Dignostni i Negovnerstva parni Dignostni Dignostni</p>	<p><b>Ambrela</b> Platform for Development Organisations</p>	<p><b>SLOGA</b> Slovenian Global Action</p>	<p><b>LA COORDINADORA</b> DE ORGANIZACIONES PARA EL DESARROLLO</p>	<p><b>CONCORD SWEDEN</b></p>
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<p><b>caritas europa</b></p>	<p><b>cbm</b> together we can do more</p>	<p><b>ChildFund Alliance</b></p>	<p><b>CIDSE</b> together for global justice</p>	<p><b>eu-cord</b> European Network of Civil Society Organisations for Human and Development</p>	<p><b>GNDR</b> Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction</p>	<p><b>Habitat for Humanity</b></p>
<p><b>humanity &amp; inclusion</b></p>	<p><b>IPPF</b> International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network</p>	<p><b>LIGHT FOR THE WORLD</b></p>	<p><b>OXFAM International</b></p>	<p><b>PLAN INTERNATIONAL</b></p>	<p><b>Save the Children</b></p>	<p><b>Sightsavers</b></p>
<p><b>solidar</b></p>	<p><b>SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL</b></p>	<p><b>Terre des Hommes International Federation</b></p>	<p><b>wecf</b></p>	<p><b>Wetlands INTERNATIONAL</b></p>	<p><b>World Vision</b></p>	<p><b>WWF</b></p>
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