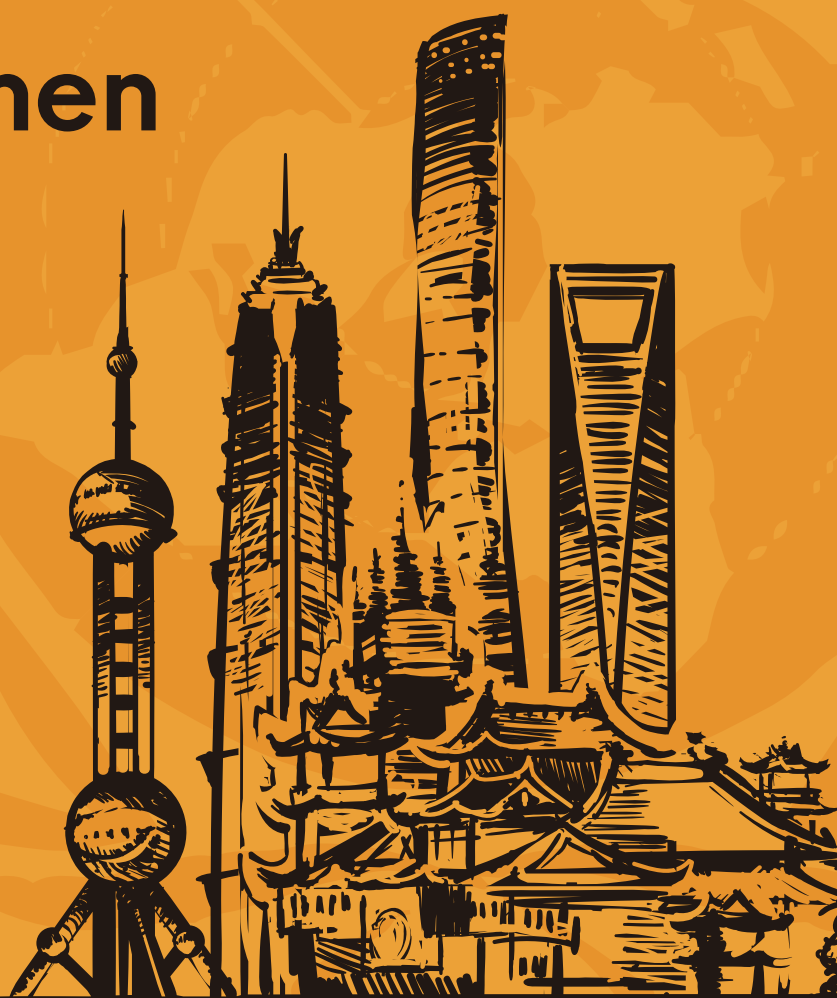


# 2025 MUNUC-SFLS Conference

上海外国语大学附属外国语学校  
芝加哥大学国际模拟联合国大会

## United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSCW)





Commission on the  
Status of Women

CSW

MUNUC-SFLS

Model United Nations of the University of Chicago

## HISTORY OF THE COMMITTEE

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the foremost global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Established in 1946, the CSW plays a pivotal role in shaping global standards and policies aimed at improving the status of women and girls around the world. During the Commission's annual two-week session, various UN and UN-affiliated entities – including state representatives and private organizations – gather at the UN headquarters. 45 member states comprise the UN member state bloc of CSW, elected and distributed by ECOSOC while maintaining equitable geographical distribution. During the 68th annual CSW, debate centered around tackling disproportionate poverty through social protection systems, access to public services, and sustainable infrastructure. The results from the CSW are forwarded to its parent body, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). At the ECOSOC, resolutions may be passed that reflect the findings of the Commission. While these resolutions are non-binding, the CSW's work has significantly influenced national policies on gender equality; many countries have adopted laws and policies aligned with the CSW's recommendations, positively affecting millions of women around the globe.

# BRIDGING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

## Statement of the Problem

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### Factors That Influence Internet Access

The gender digital divide refers to the disparities faced by women in accessing and using digital technologies, including internet access, digital literacy, and participation in the digital economy. Key factors influencing this divide include affordability constraints, lack of awareness about the benefits of digital technologies, and socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's access to and use of technology. Women in rural and low-income communities often face additional challenges in accessing and affording internet, devices, and other forms of technology. Current efforts to bridge this divide focus on increasing access to technology through initiatives such as providing subsidies for internet access, distributing low-cost or free devices, and expanding infrastructure for technology in underserved areas.

### Impacts of Internet Access

Improving women's access to the internet and digital technologies can empower and advance their socio-economic status, promote digital literacy, and enhance participation in the digital economy. Additionally, access to online health resources and telemedicine can significantly improve women's health outcomes. Social inclusion is another critical impact, as internet access can provide platforms for women to connect, share experiences, and support each other, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Conversely, the lack of internet access can have severe consequences for women's well-being and economic mobility. Without access to the Internet, women are cut off from essential information and opportunities for education and employment. They may miss out on vital health information and services, leading to poorer health outcomes. This digital divide can exacerbate existing gender inequalities,

trapping women in cycles of poverty and limiting their potential to improve their lives and those of their families.

## Differences in Access To the Internet

Globally, in 2022, 62% of men are using the Internet, compared with 57% of women.<sup>1</sup> In the countries with the lowest levels of socioeconomic development, this number falls to about 19%. The disparity is low, if not nonexistent, in areas like the Americas and Europe. However, in many areas in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, a substantial discrepancy exists in internet access and usage.<sup>2</sup> While efforts have helped narrow the gap to some extent, significant disparities persist, particularly in rural and low-income communities where women often face additional barriers such as affordability constraints and lack of awareness about the benefits of digital technologies. To address this divide, it is crucial to develop programs targeted at women and girls, which promote digital awareness and literacy and address socio-cultural barriers that could hinder women's access to and use of technology. Along with this comes a focus on STEM education and technology-related careers for young girls, through dismantling gender stereotypes and promoting positive female participation and inclusion. By creating a space to promote and be engaged in technology-related careers, we can promote women's participation and leadership in the digital sector. However, for this to occur, the existing gender biases and discriminations need to be addressed to ensure equal opportunities for women in digital employment and entrepreneurship.

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<sup>1</sup> ITU. *Bridging the Gender Divide*. 2024.  
<https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx#:~:text=Of%20the%20estimated%202.6%E2%80%8B,gender%20gap%20stands%20at%208%25>.

<sup>2</sup> ITU. *Facts and Figures 2023 - The gender digital divide*

## History of the Problem

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### History of the Problem, By Region

In 1991, the World Wide Web first came into use by the public, entering into general use several years later. As more and more websites became available, usage saw a stratospheric rise; by the end of the millennium, hundreds of millions of people around the world were actively using the internet.<sup>3</sup> While the Internet was invented in the United States, Asia overtook them as the predominant user of the Internet by 2001. In 2005, over one billion people were online; just five years later, that number doubled, led by China adding over three hundred million users in that timeframe. As of 2020, 4.7 billion people utilized the Internet; in other words, over half of the world adopted it within three decades of its commercial release. However, this growth is not equally distributed. Between 2013 and 2019, the Internet gender gap was shrinking or zero in the Americas and Europe. However, in the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, and Africa, the gender gap was growing; while more and more people were getting access to the internet in these areas, those who were obtaining access were predominantly men.<sup>4</sup> Between 2017 and 2023, however, over 400 million women in low and middle-income countries gained access to the internet.<sup>5</sup> As of 2022, global internet usage rates for men and women were 69% and 63%, respectively, amounting to a difference of around 480 million.

In the Americas – specifically, North America – internet adoption was earlier, on average. North America achieved 50% usage by 2001, and as of 2021 had an internet usage rate of over 90%. Comparatively, South America lagged behind, reaching 50% usage as recently as 2015; as of 2021, around three-quarters of South America utilized the internet. These high levels of usage reflect a welcome fact: in 2022, gender parity – defined by the International Telecommunication Union as the ratio between

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<sup>3</sup> Murphy, Julia, Max Roser, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina. 2023. “Internet.” <https://ourworldindata.org/internet>

<sup>4</sup> ITU. *Bridging the Gender Divide*. <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> GSMA. 2024. “Gender Gap - Mobile for Development.” <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/#map>

internet usage of women over internet usage of men – was exactly 1.<sup>6</sup> This holds true even when separating North and South America, even with their different rates of internet adoption. In South America, however, this gender parity is a recent development; as recently as 2017, there was a 5% gap in internet use. Mobile internet usage among women increased by over 20%, and the number of women without access to mobile internet halved within the same period.<sup>7</sup> However, in some nations in Central and South America, internet usage remains significantly lower than in surrounding countries, with internet adoption beginning later and usage growth being slower.

In the past several decades, North America has been one of the wealthiest regions in the world, with economic output well above the global average. In particular, the United States and Mexico are some of the wealthiest countries in the world, and capable of spending far more on internet infrastructure and integration than most other countries. However, smaller countries in Central America are comparatively poorer; this is reflected in their overall access to the internet as well, with some nations not even breaking past 50% of internet usage. A similar situation takes place in South America as well; wealthier countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile boast high levels of internet access and usage, while less developed countries face economic challenges in integrating internet access into the daily lives of their citizens. In these wealthier countries, rates of internet usage are so high that there is little room for disparities in internet usage by gender. In nations where internet usage is not as ubiquitous, a noticeable gender divide may form. Importantly, lower rates of internet usage do not necessarily indicate the presence of a digital gender divide but rather denote the possibility of a problematic gender divide.

The European continent is home to nations with the highest purchasing power parities (PPP) in the world, even surpassing the likes of the United States. Since the invention and popularization of the Internet, European economic growth has been strong overall. There are significant economic differences, but unlike their counterparts in the Americas, economic development is not necessarily correlated as

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<sup>6</sup> ITU. *Facts and Figures 2023 - The gender digital divide*

<sup>7</sup> GSMA. “*Gender Gap - Mobile for Development*.”

strongly with internet usage. Most countries report over 80% internet usage, with many reporting 90%+. Some very wealthy countries like Italy and France have usage rates below 90%, while comparatively poorer countries per capita like Latvia and Estonia report rates over 90%.

European access to the internet grew comparatively slower than North America, but much faster than all other regions. Its adoption of the internet trailed North America by around five years, only reaching close to parity after 2015. In 2022, Europe had 88% of its population using the Internet; however, the growth curves that led the continent to that point varied. Some countries experienced periods of explosive growth, while others integrated the internet at a slower pace. Regardless of their growth patterns, most European countries have achieved very high internet usage rates, with just a few Eastern European countries slightly lagging. Similarly to the Americas, men and women exhibit similar levels of internet usage rates, although the gender parity is not precisely one. While there are some specific disparities – the gap between men and women in using the internet specifically for bill payments in Europe and Central Asia is 5.2 percent – the overall digital gender divide in Europe is not as pronounced as in most other regions.<sup>8</sup>

With over half of the world's internet users coming from Asia, its contribution to internet usage rates cannot be understated; however, Asian usage by gender is not as equitable as in the Americas and Europe. Over 2.5 billion users originate from this area, but their spread greatly varies from region to region and country to country.<sup>9</sup> While East Asia and the Pacific region saw internet adoption equal to – and eventually surpassing – the global average, South Asia lagged greatly behind, with as little as 20% of the population online as recently as 2018. By 2023, 83% of women in East Asia and the wider Pacific region used mobile internet, compared to just 55% in South Asia. These figures are massively up in recent years; in 2017, only 61% and just 19% of women used mobile internet in East Asia and South Asia, respectively. This increase in mobile internet usage also reflects the digital gender divide in these areas; in

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<sup>8</sup> World Bank. 2024. “*Europe & Central Asia | World Bank Gender Data Portal.*” World Bank Gender Data Portal. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/regions/europe-central-asia>

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, Julia, Max Roser, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina. “*Internet.*” <https://ourworldindata.org/internet>



the last six years, the digital gender gap has more than halved in South Asia. In 2017, the gap was approximately 66%; today, the gap is around 31% – still large, but decreasing. Compared to East Asia, where the mobile internet gap currently stands at 4%, South Asia faces a serious problem in digital equality.

Similarly to the Americas, countries in Asia vary greatly in terms of size and economy. While countries in this region have been some of the largest contributors to the increasing number of people using the internet, internet usage is not correlated as strongly with a country's economic condition. Nations like Thailand see higher rates of internet usage than wealthier nations like Japan and China, bucking the trend seen in other parts of the world. Interestingly, in a report on mobile internet usage by the GSMA, a survey conducted in South Asian countries found that mobile phone or data affordability was not the most significant barrier to entry; rather, factors such as literacy, safety, and social norms were the primary reasons cited for not using mobile internet.<sup>10</sup> When compared to other surveyed nations, literacy, and social norm-related concerns were disproportionately represented in most Asian countries.

The remainder of the world can be split up into two large, distinct regions: the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In these regions, internet usage has historically varied greatly by country; these regions have both the most and least-connected countries in the world. While many countries in this region have experienced decades of consistent internet usage, others have barely begun to come online. According to the ITU, while internet usage broadly increased in these regions between 2013 and 2019, the gender gap increased due to the disproportionate number of men who joined the internet.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the rest of the world, the digital gender divide today is not closing at the same rate as other nations. In the past seven years, the MENA region has seen a gender gap decrease from 21% to 16%, while Sub-Saharan Africa saw a decrease from 34% to 32%. Many countries in this region must

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<sup>10</sup> GSMA. "Gender Gap - Mobile for Development." [https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=button&utm\\_campaign=gender-gap-2024](https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2024)

<sup>11</sup> ITU. *Bridging the Gender Divide*. <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>

tackle simply increasing access to the internet, with questions about the gender divide potentially being less pertinent. At these rates, it may take decades to fully close the divide, potentially harming generations of women.

The MENA region is home to exceptionally wealthy nations, with abundant, valuable natural resources. However, the magnitude of their digital gender divide is not comparable to similar nations with similar internet adoption and wealth. In Iraq – where internet usage is at almost 80% – there is over a 15% difference in usage between men and women.<sup>12</sup> Compared to countries with lower levels of internet usage, the differences disproportionately affect women. In this region, surveyed women often cited literacy as the primary barrier to accessing the internet. For women who already had access, on the other hand, their primary concern was safety and consistent connectivity.

The Sub-Saharan region is one of the poorest regions in the world, with many nations lagging substantially behind the global average. Its overall rate of internet adoption is by far the lowest out of all the regions, and with that comes the highest digital gender divide in the world. Unlike other affected regions, however, the digital divide is barely decreasing. Surveys done in countries in this region showed that the primary barrier to entry was affordability; many individuals in these countries simply cannot afford access to the internet, mobile or otherwise. While the financial barrier exists throughout the region, women are disproportionately impacted; men are more likely to have internet access, and thus be faced with problems such as connectivity issues.

The digital gender divide takes shape in many forms across the world, which poses challenges to tackling the core issue of equal internet access. The cause of this issue is multifaceted, and solutions are not clear. The global expansion of internet access over the past few decades has been rapid, yet uneven, with significant variations across regions and between genders. While regions like North America and Europe have achieved high levels of internet usage with small or no gender disparities, other areas –

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<sup>12</sup> Raz, Daniella. 2020. “*The Arab World’s Digital Divide – Arab Barometer*.” <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/09/the-mena-digital-divide/>

particularly in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa – continue to struggle with significant digital gender divides. As internet access becomes increasingly essential in modern life, addressing these gaps is crucial to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of gender or location, can fully participate in the digital world. Without targeted efforts to close the digital gender divide, particularly in underdeveloped and developing regions, these inequalities may persist for decades to come.

## Past Actions and Possible Solutions

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### Global Efforts

The digital gender divide has attracted significant attention from international organizations, governments, and NGOs. While solving the issue is widely considered economically and socially beneficial, the divide persists worldwide. Organizations worldwide have launched various initiatives aimed at closing the gap, and have proposed future policies to eliminate the gap.

One of the largest efforts is the EQUALS Global Partnership, launched by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UN Women in 2016.<sup>13</sup> It was launched in alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; leaders of gender-focused international organizations realized that to achieve the agenda's goals, a specific organization focused on closing gender inequality in the digital space was necessary. The mission of this newfound partnership was to provide women with equal opportunity in the digital space through economic and policy-related interventions. This partnership brings together governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to address barriers to women's access to digital technologies.

A key program under the partnership is the EQUALS Digital Skills Fund, which provides grants to organizations focused on teaching women and girls digital skills around the world.<sup>14</sup> The fund sponsors a range of activities, from basic digital literacy training to more advanced training in industries such as robotics and drone technology. Through funding a variety of initiatives, this fund helps increase internet usage rates and gender parity in technology-based sectors. By providing direct financial awards to grassroots organizations, the fund ensures that organizations promoting digital skills for women remain solvent and operational. Recipients are primarily organizations seeking to improve women's digital skills

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<sup>13</sup> EQUALS Global Partnership. n.d. "*EQUALS Global Partnership to Bridge the Digital Gender Divide.*" <https://www.equalsintech.org/>

<sup>14</sup> EQUALS Digital Skills Fund. 2018. "*EQUALS Digital Skills Fund - World Wide Web Foundation.*" <https://webfoundation.org/digitalskillsfund/>

in countries and regions with limited access to the internet and large gender disparities in internet usage, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and South America. Grants are also sometimes targeted toward specific regions like the eSkills4Girls Fund, which provides grants to local initiatives seeking to improve digital skills in the Global South.<sup>15</sup>

EQUALS also annually partners with ITU to support Girls in ICT Day, an event that encourages girls and young women to pursue careers in ICT (Information and Communication Technology).<sup>16</sup> Unlike other initiatives, this program primarily targets girls with internet access; however, it may have indirect, downstream effects on internet usage rates by women. The event includes workshops, career fairs, and mentorship sessions designed to inspire the next generation of female tech leaders. This program aims to specifically close the career gap in STEM-related fields, rather than an access gap.

While EQUALS runs many programs directly, they also play a critical role in shaping policy in specific nations, providing indirect benefits. On a policy level, EQUALS aims to influence national policy on digital gender equality. The organization works with governments and international organizations to adopt policies that address the specific needs of women and girls in the digital space, including advocating for gender-inclusive digital education, reducing the cost of digital access, and encouraging measures that protect women from online harassment. EQUALS streamlines the policymaking process through the publication of guides such as their Handbook on mainstreaming Gender in Digital Policies, which provides policymakers worldwide with insights on how to implement gender-equal digital policy in their nation.<sup>17</sup>

The World Bank has also been instrumental in promoting digital inclusion through its Digital Development Partnership (DDP).<sup>18</sup> Founded in 2016, the DDP provides technical assistance and funding

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<sup>15</sup> EQUALS in Tech. 2020. “*ESKILLS4GIRLS FUND | Equals*.” <https://www.equalstech.org/eskills4girls-fund>

<sup>16</sup> Girls in ICT. 2024. “*International #GirlsInICT Day*.” <https://www.itu.int/women-and-girls/girls-in-ict/>

<sup>17</sup> ITU. July 11, 2024. “*Handbook on Mainstreaming Gender in Digital Policies - ITU*.” [https://www.equalstech.org/\\_files/ugd/04bfff\\_41721870b4b24ada95de550ba9deafc5.pdf](https://www.equalstech.org/_files/ugd/04bfff_41721870b4b24ada95de550ba9deafc5.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Digital Development Partnership. 2022. “*Digital Development Partnership*.” <https://www.digitaldevelopmentpartnership.org/>

to countries to enhance their digital infrastructure, develop policies that promote digital inclusion, and build digital literacy among underserved populations, particularly women and girls. Through this program, the World Bank has lent over ten billion dollars to over eighty countries, primarily in the Global South. In several pilot programs launched by the DDP, digital literacy programs positively impacted the participants' socioeconomic conditions, with increased internet usage, increased employment, and increased incomes on average.<sup>19</sup>

While many global initiatives are largely from international organizations and NGOs, there also exists substantial private sector support. The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) is an initiative founded in 2013, backed by corporations, governments, and CSOs, to decrease internet costs in countries with low to middle levels of development.<sup>20</sup> In its decade-long existence, it has worked with policymakers around the world – specifically, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – to create country-specific policies to reduce the price of the internet to just a fraction of the average monthly income in each country. However, their true impact has been debated, with critics claiming that the alliance's aim is not to decrease internet costs through influencing internet policy, but rather shaping internet policy itself for their interests.<sup>21</sup>

## Regional Actions and Solutions

### Sub-Saharan Africa

The Sub-Saharan region has the highest digital gender divide, with women significantly less likely than men to use the internet in any capacity; furthermore, the divide is not closing at a comparable rate to other regions, indicating systemic issues plaguing progress. This disparity is a result of a multitude of factors, but surveys run by the Global System for Mobile Communications found that the primary

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<sup>19</sup> DDP. 2022. "Annual Review." Adobe.com. 2022.  
<https://indd.adobe.com/view/6a1d7a70-3b72-498d-afba-64fb0f84a8e6>

<sup>20</sup> A4AI. 2022. "Good Practices Database - Alliance for Affordable Internet."  
<https://a4ai.org/policy-advocacy/good-practices-database/>

<sup>21</sup> Gurstein, Mike . 2016. "A4AI: Who Could Oppose a More Affordable Internet?"  
<https://gurstein.wordpress.com/2016/03/20/a4ai-who-could-oppose-a-more-affordable-internet-the-alliance-for-an-affordable-internet-a4ai-and-the-neo-liberal-stealth-campaign-to-control-the-internet-throughout-the-developing-world-and-make/>

challenge in the region is economic above all else. Even with falling costs of internet – Sub-Saharan Africa has some of the cheapest internet in the world – the cost of devices and internet services is still prohibitively high for many people in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>22</sup> This economic barrier disproportionately affects women, who, on average, have lower incomes and less financial independence than men in the region. Furthermore, the region’s inadequate digital infrastructure – limited internet coverage and unreliable access to electricity – further restricts access.

While economic measures could help close the digital divide, the economic conditions of many nations in this region often mean that government resources are focused on other, potentially more pressing issues. Many efforts to tackle the digital gender divide in this region have thus been spearheaded by international, rather than domestic organizations. One program launched by UN Women in 2018 was the African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI).<sup>23</sup> Supported by the African Union Commission and the ITU, the purpose of the program was to provide women ages 17 to 25 with coding and digital skills training to inspire a generation of female tech leaders. However, this initiative was small in scale; the program aimed to train just 2000 girls over five years. While the initiative is praiseworthy, the scale of the project means that the overall situation of digital access in this region is largely unaffected.

To successfully bridge the digital divide in Sub-Saharan Africa, systemic, national-scale change may be necessary. Governments, with the assistance of international aid, could increase investments in digital infrastructure, with an emphasis on rural and underserved areas. To capitalize upon these investments, programs could be run to encourage local businesses to utilize the Internet, naturally increasing awareness and usage through an economic incentive. To convince governments of the benefits of digitalization, specific studies could be conducted in areas with low internet usage to calculate the return on investment of building internet infrastructure. Furthermore, while economic issues are the

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<sup>22</sup> Fleck, Anna. 2023. “*Infographic: The Cost of Mobile Internet in Africa.*” <https://www.statista.com/chart/29144/cost-of-mobile-data-in-africa/>

<sup>23</sup> UN Women. n.d. “*African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI).*” UN Women – Africa. <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/liaison-office-to-au-and-uneca/african-girls-can-code-initiative-agcci>

primary barrier in this region, cultural issues still exist and pose significant challenges to bridging the digital divide. Education and awareness campaigns targeting both men and women can break down societal norms that restrict women's access to and usage of technology.

### **The Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**

The MENA region is characterized by significant cultural and societal, rather than economic barriers that restrict women's access to digital technologies. Many nations in this region boast impressive economies, yet have not achieved digital gender parity on the level of economically comparable nations around the world. Traditional gender roles and conservative societal norms can limit women's mobility and opportunities to use the Internet. Although some countries in the region have made substantial investments and progress in achieving gender parity, the digital gender divide remains pronounced in certain nations.

MENA's digital gender divide is exacerbated by a larger, overarching issue: lack of gender parity with respect to literacy rates. In many countries and the region as a whole, women report lower literacy rates than men, rendering them unable to utilize the internet productively.<sup>24</sup> A gap even exists when only considering teenagers and young adults, which means that the issue persists through generations. This literacy gap has been attributed to many factors, including educational deficiencies – more specifically, unfavorable attitudes toward the education of women.<sup>25</sup>

In the past, governments and international organizations have taken steps in order to close this gap. One notable initiative is the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative We-Fi, which has provided funding and support to women-led businesses in the region, helping them leverage digital technologies to grow their enterprises. However, this effort focuses on those who already can utilize the technology,

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<sup>24</sup> UNSECO. 2024. “*Literacy Rate, Youth Female (% of Females Ages 15-24) - Middle East & North Africa | Data.*” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FE.ZS?locations=ZQ>

<sup>25</sup> Hammoud, Hassan. n.d. “*Illiteracy in the Arab World.*” <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/adult-education-and-development/editions/aed-662006/education-for-all-and-literacy/illiteracy-in-the-arab-world#:~:text=The%20most%20recent%20data%20reveals,nine%20other%20countries%20with%20large>



rather than those unable to access the digital space altogether. While there may be additional downstream effects of these initiatives on the gender gap, these effects may take years, if not decades to materialize.

A notable instance of a high-income, high-gender disparity nation is Saudi Arabia; in 2021, the gap in internet usage between men and women in Saudi Arabia was 22.1 points, far higher than the overall average in MENA.<sup>26</sup> To counteract this, Saudi Arabia has launched programs like the Ministry of ICT's Women Empowerment Program in Technology, which aims to increase women's usage of digital technologies and participation in the Internet.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, they spearheaded and organized discussions on gender equality in the UN.<sup>28</sup> However, there exists systematic issues within Saudi Arabia that disadvantage women; for example, women were not allowed to serve as lawmakers until 2011. While there may not be a single thing to point to as the reason for such a significant digital gender divide, much of it can be attributed to the overall cultural and societal views on the role of women in society.

Some countries also passed policies specifically targeted towards the digital space. For example, Jordan's National Digital Transformation Strategy & Implementation Plan aimed to transform Jordan's digital space and economy, with specific measures to address the digital gender gap.<sup>29</sup> One critical aspect of this program is INJAZ, a Jordanian-based program to provide young adults with training in digital skills, leadership, and entrepreneurship.<sup>30</sup> Since 2000, they have provided over 5 million educational opportunities to young adults and teenagers. More recently, their Digital Competencies programs aimed to

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<sup>26</sup> World Bank. 2024. "Saudi Arabia | World Bank Gender Data Portal." <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/saudi-arabia#:~:text=The%20gap%20in%20internet%20usage,in%20the%20past%2012%20months>.

<sup>27</sup> "Women's Empowerment | Ministry of Communications and Information Technology." <https://www.mcit.gov.sa/en/womens-empowerment>

<sup>28</sup> UN Saudi Arabia. 2023. "'DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality' Roundtable Discussions for International Women's Day." <https://saudiarabia.un.org/en/222920-%E2%80%9Cdigital-all-innovation-and-technology-gender-equality%E2%80%9D-roundtable-discussions-international>

<sup>29</sup> "Jordan's National Digital Transformation Strategy." 2021. Digwatch. May 2021. <https://dig.watch/resource/jordans-national-digital-transformation-strategy#:~:text=Jordan's%20National%20Digital%20Transformation%20Strategy%20%26%20Implementation%20Plan%202021%2D2025%2C,over%20the%20next%20five%20years>.

<sup>30</sup> INJAZ. 2024. "INJAZ." <https://www.injaz.org.jo/>

enhance the digital literacy of students in schools and universities, with the intent to keep their population up to date with modern technology and skills.

These Jordanian initiatives appear to have positive results. Overall literacy in Jordan is nearly 99%, with very little difference in literacy between men and women. Furthermore, mobile phone ownership is high, with little difference based on gender. However, a survey conducted by CARE International found that a woman's phone was perceived significantly different from other phones; for example, a mother's phone would be lent to their children for studying, while fathers may have priority over their phones.<sup>31</sup> While women may quantitatively have similar access to the internet, this access may not be equivalent to their male counterparts due to differences in how digital devices are utilized within households. In situations like these, there may be economic barriers that still hamper equal access to the digital world.

Addressing the digital gender divide in the MENA region requires a comprehensive approach, both to tackle economic issues and ingrained societal norms. Changing societal attitudes towards the role of women in society can help naturally bridge the digital gender divide. For example, community-based programs that engage both men and women in discussions about the importance of digital inclusion can help shift cultural norms. Importantly, however, is the role of government in shifting attitudes. Addressing literacy gaps through targeted education initiatives can empower more women to participate in the digital world. Integrating the digital space into schools and education can help create a culture of internet usage; providing laptops or some form of access to the internet through these schools can help reach digital gender parity among students. Methods to bring about change in a given nation must be led by willing governments that can implement policies that aim to close the gender divide. Conversely, a resistant or apathetic government may ensure the continuation of the digital gender divide for years to come.

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<sup>31</sup> CARE Jordan. 2023. "*Gender and Inclusion Analysis on the Digital Divide*." [https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/CARE%20Jordan\\_Report%20Gender%20and%20Inclusion%20Analysis%20on%20the%20Digital%20Divide.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/CARE%20Jordan_Report%20Gender%20and%20Inclusion%20Analysis%20on%20the%20Digital%20Divide.pdf)

## Asia

Asia's digital access is a diverse landscape throughout the continent, with significant disparities between regions and countries. In general, East Asian nations have seen comprehensive adoption of the digital landscape, with internet usage rates that far surpass the global average. However, many nations in South Asia lag significantly behind, with lower internet penetration rates and a wider digital gender divide.

In South Asia, factors such as low literacy rates, restrictive social norms, and safety concerns significantly hinder women's access to digital technologies. Primary factors differ between countries in this region as well; Bangladesh primarily has a literacy issue, while Pakistan has significant problems with both literacy and social norms; Indonesia has major safety concerns.<sup>32</sup> Many women in this region face barriers to education and employment, limiting their ability to benefit from the opportunities provided by the digital economy. For example, a UN Women forum found that many companies in this region failed to report or collect gender-based data in the workplace; in fact, many of them were unsure as to how to collect and interpret data.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, East Asia is significantly more digital than South Asia; however, challenges remain present, particularly in rural areas – areas where women are less likely to use the internet or own mobile devices. While economic conditions in East Asia are generally more favorable, disparities in access still exist, especially when comparing urban and rural areas. While urban areas in this region are highly connected – some of these cities like Seoul and Tokyo are considered among the most connected areas in the world – rural areas like islands and in mountainous regions face slower broadband speeds and less

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<sup>32</sup> GSMA. "Gender Gap - Mobile for Development."

[https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=button&utm\\_campaign=gender-gap-2024](https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2024)

<sup>33</sup> "Asia-Pacific Outcome Report: Highlights and Recommendations for Practitioners WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES FORUM."

[https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/asia-pacific-weps-forum\\_outcome-report\\_final.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/asia-pacific-weps-forum_outcome-report_final.pdf)

access than their urban counterparts. These differences limit the ability of women in rural areas to utilize the Internet, be it for education, employment, or personal development.

One initiative started to tackle the digital divide in South Asia is GSMA's Connected Women Commitment Initiative, whose aim is to reduce the gender gap in mobile internet in low and middle-income countries.<sup>34</sup> This initiative involves mobile internet providers across Africa and Asia, who have pledged to reduce the gender gap of their consumers. Since 2016, this initiative has connected over 70 million women since 2016. Initiatives like these are implemented in conjunction with programs spearheaded by international organizations like UNICEF South Asia, which aims to enroll over 10 million children in schools, while simultaneously strengthening and modernizing the education system in the region.<sup>35</sup>

In East Asia, several programs and goals have been outlined by national governments, including South Korea's Enhancing Digital Inclusiveness plan. In this plan, the South Korean government planned to build high-speed internet infrastructure in more than 1,300 rural areas, as well as operate 1,000 digital learning centers. Their stated goals also included installing Wi-Fi access points in over 40,000 public spaces. This is a relatively new initiative, and the results and impact of these constructions are not yet clear. However, the program has the potential to substantially boost internet usage rates in rural areas; without specific aims and mentions of digital parity, however, there is a small risk of improper implementation rendering the program ineffective in closing any gender gap.

The digital gender divide is an issue rooted in economic, cultural, and societal structures across the globe, without a clear and easy treatment. While significant efforts have been made by important stakeholders to address this gap, it remains a persistent challenge, particularly in developing regions and rural areas. Through targeted interventions such as digital literacy programs, infrastructure development,

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<sup>34</sup> GSMA. n.d. "*Connected Women Commitment Initiative*." GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/connected-women/the-commitment/>

<sup>35</sup> UNICEF. 2017. "*Education*." <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/education>

and policy advocacy, the gap has largely narrowed in recent years. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies by region, highlighting the need for specific, in-depth solutions that address the specific barriers faced by women in accessing the internet. In regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, a combination of infrastructural investment and cultural change is essential, while in more developed areas like East Asia, closing the rural-urban divide is crucial. Achieving digital gender parity would mean accelerated economic growth, equal access to opportunities and resources, and – most importantly – a more equitable, fairer world where men and women have equal opportunities to thrive.

## **Bloc Positions**

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The global digital gender divide remains a deeply ingrained issue that is intertwined with economic, cultural, and social factors. While there is general consensus that closing the gap is important and ideal, countries vary significantly in their approaches and priorities, shaped by their unique contexts, resources, and political will. At a very base level, some countries simply do not have the resources necessary to tackle the issue; other, more pressing concerns take precedence over the digital gender divide. These bloc positions provide a broad framework for understanding how different groups of countries address the issue. However, not all nations fit perfectly into these blocs; some economically developed countries have a disproportionate gender parity, while other nations have committed to changes, yet not displayed meaningful progress towards their goals.

### **Developed Nations With High Digital Gender Parity**

Countries like Sweden, Germany, Canada, and Australia fall into this category. These nations have made significant progress in achieving digital gender parity, thanks to strong infrastructure, high literacy rates, and supportive policies – all backed by impressive economies. They focus on advanced initiatives, such as promoting women's participation in STEM fields and leadership roles within the tech industry. Women not having access to the internet is largely not a factor; internet usage is near-universal, with access being often a given. These countries advocate for global initiatives aimed at closing the digital gender divide and often provide funding and technical support to developing nations, as they themselves do not necessarily require assistance. However, they may sometimes overlook the unique challenges faced by countries with less advanced digital infrastructure.

### **Developing Nations Focused On Infrastructure and Education**

Nations in this bloc, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Algeria, recognize the importance of digital inclusion as a driver of economic growth and social development. These countries typically have fewer

resources than developed nations, but are in an economic position to at least attempt to tackle the issue at hand. They are often focused on expanding internet infrastructure and improving digital literacy, particularly in rural areas where the digital gender gap is most pronounced. However, a nationwide focus on improving internet usage rates is also important, as there may be gaps in access even in urban areas. Often, these countries partner with international organizations and the private sector to fund and implement programs suited for their unique situation. However, their efforts are sometimes hindered by economic or political factors that shift the priorities of regional governments.

## **Nations With Significant Cultural Barriers**

Countries in this group, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, face substantial societal challenges that contribute to the digital gender divide. In these countries, traditional gender roles, conservative social norms, and – in some cases – restrictive laws limit women’s access to certain resources. Economic factors are sometimes an issue – families may prioritize internet access for men – but this is not always the case for members of this bloc. While there are ongoing efforts to address these issues—such as government-led initiatives and international partnerships—progress is often slow, and the digital gender gap remains wide. Economic solutions may help, but may not change attitudes towards women. These nations may prioritize cultural and social change alongside infrastructural development; however, they may face resistance from conservative elements within society. Nations in this bloc may have to balance the economic and social benefits of bridging the digital gender divide and any potential pushback from their citizens.

## **Underdeveloped Nations With Limited Digital Infrastructure**

Underdeveloped nations face the most significant challenges in addressing the digital gender divide due to limited digital infrastructure, high levels of poverty. In some nations, cultural norms further exacerbate these issues. For many of these countries, basic access to the internet and digital devices is limited, and the gender divide is exacerbated by factors such as lower literacy rates, economic

dependency, and restricted mobility. These nations often rely heavily on international aid and partnerships to improve digital access and gender equality. Their primary focus is on building foundational infrastructure, such as expanding internet coverage to rural areas, and implementing basic digital literacy programs targeted at women and girls. These nations typically see limited benefit from programs targeted at higher technological education; building basic skills and improving access is a prerequisite. However, due to limited resources, progress is slow, and the digital gender divide remains a significant barrier to broader development goals. In international forums, these nations typically advocate for more substantial support from developed countries and international organizations to address these challenges.



## Glossary

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**Bloc:** A group of countries or entities with similar characteristics or goals, often working together on certain issues.

**Broadband:** A high-capacity internet connection that is faster and more reliable than traditional dial-up access.

**CSOs (Civil Society Organizations):** Non-governmental organizations that represent the interests and will of citizens, often involved in advocating for social, political, or environmental issues.

**Cultural Barriers:** Social norms and traditions that can prevent or limit certain behaviors or access to resources, such as women using the internet.

**Developed Nations:** Countries with advanced economies, high standards of living, and well-developed infrastructure.

**Developing Nations:** Countries with less advanced economies, lower standards of living, and developing infrastructure.

**Digital Gender Divide:** The gap between men and women in terms of access to and use of digital technologies like the internet, mobile phones, and computers.

**Digital Gender Parity:** Equal access to digital technologies and opportunities between men and women. This is sometimes calculated by dividing the percentage of women who use the internet by the percentage of men who use the internet. Gender parity is considered to be achieved when the score is between 0.98 and 1.02.

**Digital Inclusiveness:** Efforts to ensure that all individuals and communities, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have access to and can benefit from digital technologies.

**Digital Infrastructure:** The physical and organizational structures needed to operate and use digital technologies, such as internet networks, servers, and data centers.

**Digital Literacy:** The ability to use digital tools and technologies effectively, including the internet, computers, and software.

**Digital Transformation:** The process of using digital technologies to change how businesses and governments operate, often leading to improved efficiency and access to services.

**Economic Dependency:** When a person or group relies on others for financial support, which can limit their independence and opportunities.

**Global South:** A term used to describe developing nations, primarily located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

**Grassroots Organizations:** Local groups or movements that work from the community level to bring about change, often focusing on specific, localized issues.

**ICT (Information and Communication Technology):** An umbrella term that includes all digital technologies used to handle telecommunications, broadcast media, intelligent building management systems, audiovisual processing and transmission systems, and network-based control and monitoring functions.

**Infrastructural Investment:** The allocation of resources to build and improve infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and digital networks.

**Internet Gender Gap:** The disparity in internet access and usage between men and women, varying significantly across different regions.

**ITU (International Telecommunication Union):** A specialized agency of the United Nations that works to improve telecommunications and access to information and communication technologies globally.

**Literacy Rates:** The percentage of people who can read and write in a given population.

**Mobile Internet:** Internet access through mobile devices like smartphones and tablets, typically via cellular networks.

**NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations):** Organizations that are independent of government control and work to address social, political, or environmental issues.

**Purchasing Power Parity (PPP):** An economic theory comparing the relative value of different currencies, reflecting purchasing power in different countries.

**Socio-cultural Barriers:** Social and cultural factors that limit or restrict individuals' access to opportunities, such as technology usage, often due to gender norms.

**Socioeconomic Conditions:** The social and economic factors that influence and characterize the well-being of individuals or communities, such as income, education, and employment.

**STEM:** An acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, fields where women are often underrepresented.

**Sub-Saharan Africa:** A region of Africa located south of the Sahara Desert, characterized by a wide range of cultural, economic, and political diversity.

**Telemedicine:** The provision of medical services remotely through digital technology, often via the internet.

**UN Women:** A United Nations organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

**UNICEF:** The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, an agency of the UN that provides humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide.

**Underdeveloped Nations:** Countries with very low levels of economic development, poor infrastructure, and high levels of poverty.

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