Gender & Access

AFFORDABILITY REPORT 2020 THEMATIC BRIEF

In December 2018, the ITU estimated that, for the first time, more than half the world has connected to the internet. And yet, with their update two years later in December 2020, a majority of women remain offline. The digital divide has a deep gender gap within it — and connectivity strategies that aim for universal access must address this.

Unfortunately, gender targets remain too infrequent in broadband policy. **Of all the policy areas studied by the Affordability Report, average scores on gender policy remain the lowest.** 29 countries – just over 40% of the countries in the study – had no meaningful programming for women's access to the internet.

Some leading examples offer hope for ways forward.

🇸🇳 Senegal

↑ The Digital Senegal plan includes a high-level commitment to mainstream gender in all broadband policy decisions and also sets a clear target for a 33% rate of use of e-commerce and public services by the rural female population by 2025.

🇨🇷 Costa Rica

↑ The national broadband plan in Costa Rica includes women's access as a core component and sets goals around supporting women's online entrepreneurship within the plan's targets.

🇹🇭 Thailand

↑ While lacking gendered targets in its national broadband plan, the country's Women Development Strategy includes promotion of women's access, training, and use of the internet – all with the ambition of supporting a greater proportion of women pursuing STEM-related degrees.

🌍 Globally

↑ A lack of gender-disaggregated data is a challenge for closing the digital gender gap, but innovative uses of online advertising data provide an opportunity to fill in gaps and set baselines for progress.

The digital divide is sexist. Digital inclusion does not exist without women's inclusion.

Omitting the gender dimension leaves the internet to replicate, rather than challenge, social inequalities. Across Africa, only 1 in 5 women use the internet, and the digital gender gap has grown since 2013. Similarly, the gender gap in mobile phone ownership between men and women in North Africa and the Middle East and across sub-Saharan Africa has remained stagnant over the past three years.

POLICY LEADERBOARD		(/10)
1st	Costa Rica	7.0
2nd	Colombia	6.0
3rd	Botswana	6.0
4th	Indonesia	6.0
5th	Senegal	6.0
6th	Rwanda	6.0
7th	Papua New Guinea	6.0

Top earners in this category – such as Botswana, Senegal, and Costa Rica – set clear targets for women's inclusion within their national broadband plans. Botswana's national broadband strategy includes gendered targets for smartphone access, digital literacy, and ICT graduates. Its proposed USAF strategic plan also recognises the gender gap as a barrier to address.

Much remains to be done to close the digital gender gap and scale digital economies into inclusive engines for economic growth. The use of evidence based research, such as those gathered via gender gap audits and scorecards, are critical to highlight and prioritize reforms. Sustainable change will only be achieved through the inclusion of women and girls, and their interests, in the broadband policy-making process as illustrated in policymaker training workshops.

A4AI's Policy Recommendations —

1. Leverage Universal Service & Access Funds to explicitly address the digital gender gap and support women's connectivity, especially through demand-side interventions , skill-building and co-creating online content.

2. Open the policy-making process to the public, and include women's groups in all stages of consultations, drafts, iterations, and reviews.

3. Adopt strategies such as subsidies or innovative funding schemes to reduce the cost of handsets and devices, which disproportionately keep women offline due to high costs.