



BUILDING BACK BETTER FOR WOMEN:
DIGITAL INCLUSION

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Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of women – but the pandemic presents an opportunity to build back a more gender-equal global economy.

In the build-up to the G20 Leaders' Summit in Saudi Arabia, the official women's empowerment engagement group to the G20. The Women 20 (W20) Saudi Arabia has partnered with Accenture Research on a series of articles highlighting specific areas in which it is vital we take action to empower women.

A full report building on these articles will be delivered ahead of the G20 Summit in November 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The W20 Saudi Arabia is grateful to the following individuals for their invaluable support and dedication

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OVERVIEW

The W20, as part of its broader efforts to urge G20 Leaders to correct the stark imbalances in economic opportunities that exist for women, is making a series of recommendations geared towards promoting equitable digital inclusion.

The purpose of this article is to set out the key economic, social and educational reasons why equitable digital inclusion is so important, and to highlight why (due to COVID-19) the need to make progress on this front is more urgent now than ever.



COVID-19 has made digital inclusion more important (but also harder to achieve) than ever before.



Driving up levels of digital access, literacy and fluency among women will create huge cultural, social and economic benefits.



Education is the key, but proactive changes will be required if we are to make real progress in terms of empowering women to transform themselves from being 'users' of tech to becoming 'producers' of tech.

COVID-19, PLUS THE DIGITAL GENDER GAP, EQUALS A GRAVE THREAT TO WOMEN'S HEALTH, SECURITY, AND PROSPERITY

The pandemic has made having the ability to access and use digital tools and services a critical link to essential products and services. In this context, the gender digital divide has proven a glaring setback for women, especially in poor and developing countries.

Here's how securing equitable digital inclusion can make a real difference.



In the past six months, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated physical restrictions have made people more reliant on digital services than ever before.

These changes have occurred within an incredibly short space of time, and they have affected populations across all parts of the development and socio-economic spectrums.

In many countries, digital tools are now the primary – or even the only – means of accessing up-to-date, accurate information about how to combat the virus and stay healthy. Contact tracing apps, for example, are becoming vital in allowing people to move around safely and confidently. Mobile devices and digital communication methods can prove invaluable and discrete for summoning help in times of distress, such as alerting others to gender-based violence (of which the UN estimates the world will experience an additional 15 million cases for each 3-month period of lockdown¹) or getting advice about mental health (which, according to a recent UN policy briefing, is also being severely impacted by the crisis²).

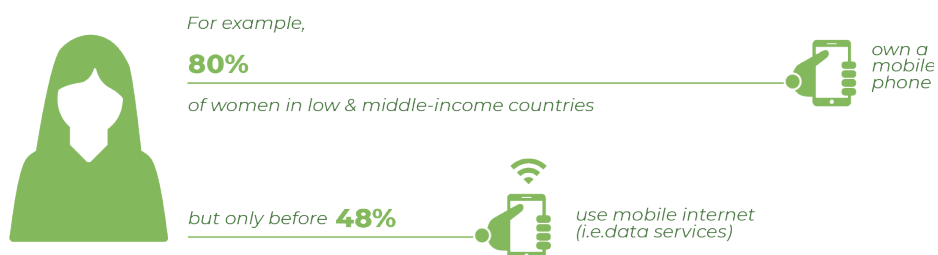
The pandemic has also increased the breadth and importance of the role technology plays in helping people stay connected with friends and family, which is crucial for sustaining morale and mental well-being in times of crisis.

And, for many workers, digital tools and workflows have allowed them to shift and adapt to being able to work from home, thereby retaining productivity and purpose – and, of course, income.

WOMEN LACK ACCESS

Digital inclusion acts as a powerful catalyst for both labor and financial inclusion, and for the empowerment of women in general. Higher levels of digital access, literacy and fluency produce an increased likelihood of getting a highly paid job.

It all starts with access. However, many women do not enjoy the same levels of digital access as men.



And despite the growing uptake of mobile internet globally, women are still 23% less likely than men to use it. Substantial differences also exist between world regions, with the gap being widest in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where women are respectively 58% and 41% less likely to use mobile internet than men are³.

The issue of having poor or varying levels of internet access is not unique to women. In total, around 3.7 billion of the world's population have no internet access⁴.

But this issue does affect women far more than it does men. According to the UN and the OECD, women and girls are least likely to have access to technology and, in some parts of the world, up to 70% of women and girls do not have mobile devices, internet access or digital literacy skills⁵. Similarly, the ITU has estimated the global internet user gender gap to be 17%⁶.

We must, therefore, significantly improve digital access and literacy among women, as these are the building blocks of digital fluency.

And achieving digital fluency is vital, because it has been shown to measurably improve women's education and employment outcomes.



Digital fluency drives up gender equality in the workplace. Research from Accenture estimated that, at the current rate of digital adoption, developed nations are not likely to achieve workplace gender equality until 2065, and developing nations not until 2100. However, if governments could double the pace at which women become frequent users of technology, then developed nations could reach gender equality by 2040, with developing nations following suit by 2060⁷.

A follow-up study from Accenture revealed that doubling the pace at which women become fluent in the use of digital technology could enable 97 million more women (77 million of whom live in developing countries) to secure paid work, and would reduce the gender pay gap by 21% worldwide⁸.

And beyond the workplace, digital fluency has become increasingly important in enabling women to make well-informed choices about every aspect of their lives.

WOMEN MUST TRANSFORM THEMSELVES FROM BEING ‘USERS’ OF TECH TO BECOMING ‘PRODUCERS’ OF TECH

Women are often seen as the users or consumers (rather than the producers) of digital technologies, and the resulting under-representation of women in fields such as cyber security, coding and app development has become a deeply limiting factor.

Attempts to diversify technology-related industries have traditionally struggled. In the US, only around a quarter of tech workers are women⁹. In the UK, the situation is even worse: women account for just 17% of IT specialists and, despite concerted industry efforts to improve this statistic, the number has barely moved during the past decade¹⁰.



There is also a marked scarcity of women in senior or board-level roles within digital and technology companies, and this lack of role models threatens to further delay the required transformation.

By transforming themselves through technologies, women will also elevate themselves from being perceived as mere beneficiaries of digital to becoming rewarded as value creators through digital.

DIGITAL FLUENCY MAY BE THE GOAL, BUT FLUENCY IS PRECEDED BY LITERACY – AND LITERACY IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT ACCESS

Transformations can only happen in stages. Different countries, and different groups within each country, find themselves at very different stages of the journey from securing digital access, to building basic digital literacy, to eventually reaping the benefits of digital fluency.

Access is vital, and it depends not only upon having the relevant technical infrastructure (such as the availability of mobile data networks and reliable broadband connections), but also upon having the right tools – both hardware and software, and some of these elements are in short or gender-unequal supply even within individual households.



Literacy and fluency are largely dependent on education, and so the current (high) levels of inequality within STEM education and training are deeply worrying. For example, globally, just 3% of students enrolling in information and communications technology (ICT) courses are women, and the equivalent figure for mathematics and statistics courses is only 5%. Even in parts of the world where things are more equal, there remains huge progress to be made; in the UK, for example, women only make up 35% of STEM students engaged in higher education¹¹.

Female academics and researchers working in STEM fields are also published less often than their male counterparts. For example, a 2017 analysis of 4,000 researchers who had published on the topic of AI in leading journals found 88% of those researchers to be men¹².

COVID-19 THREATENS TO WIDEN EXISTING GENDER DIVIDES IN EMPLOYMENT, HEALTH AND WELFARE

The pandemic is already well-known to be having a disproportionately negative impact on women in a multitude of ways.

Earlier this month, the World Economic Forum declared COVID-19 to be the biggest setback to gender equality in a decade¹³, and there is widespread concern that the pandemic will cause many pre-existing gender gaps to widen, thereby reversing the hard-won progress and achievements of recent years¹⁴.

Women are more exposed (than men) to part-time and informal employment and, as a result, they are more susceptible to job losses or income reductions.

A report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies revealed that mothers are 23% more likely than fathers to have lost their jobs (either temporarily or permanently) during the current crisis.

In the US specifically, the unemployment rate among women more than tripled within the space of a single month, surging from around 4% in March to over 16% in April¹⁵. This was the first time since the US began reporting gender-disaggregated data in 1948 that the female unemployment rate had entered double digits¹⁶, prompting many commentators to call for the impending recession to be termed a 'shecession'¹⁷.

Significant – and even deadly – gender inequality also creeps in at the industry-specific level. Many of the B2C industries which have been largely or totally shut down due to lockdown restrictions (such as hospitality and face-to-face retail) are disproportionately staffed by women. But more critically, many of the workforces facing additional pressures and physical risks – and often with little or no additional pay – as a direct result of the virus are primarily staffed by women.

70% of the world's healthcare workers are female, and this number rises to over 90% among long-term care workers¹⁸. Not all these frontline workers will survive the pandemic.



70%

*of the world's
healthcare workers
are female*

The pandemic is also creating dangerous side-effects in other areas of women's health and welfare, as regular services become either stretched or unavailable. Such secondary impacts are not without precedent. For example, during the deadly 2013-2016 outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone, more women died of obstetric complications than from Ebola¹⁹. The scale and severity of the fallout from COVID-19 in this respect could be catastrophic.

The UN has estimated that 47 million women in 114 low- and middle-income countries could lose access to modern contraceptives and that, if the lockdown were to last 6 months, this could result in 7 million unintended pregnancies²⁰. The same research also estimated that an additional 13 million child marriages would take place globally between 2020 and 2030, as the world loses focus on this and other key issues.

Women are also bearing the brunt of the pandemic's impact on everyday family life, especially in relation to home-schooling children and caring for others, although women remain largely and disappointingly absent from the pandemic decision- and policy-making process in most countries.

As has been clearly seen, COVID-19 is already visibly widening the gender divides in many areas of people's lives. These attacks must be proactively resisted – and improving the digital inclusion of women should be viewed as a key weapon in the armory.

IMMEDIATE AND DELIBERATE ACTION IS REQUIRED TO SECURE EQUITABLE DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR WOMEN

If we are to respond to this pandemic and the ensuing recession by 'Building Back Better' – and, in doing so, create a more digitally-inclusive society that empowers and champions women as equal partners in the development of technology – then we need to act quickly. We also need to be aggressively proactive, because these problems will not resolve themselves organically.

Access and education are the key factors here, but they are currently the weakest links. Governments and other stakeholders must do far more to provide women with greater access to – and tangible incentives to pursue – STEM education and careers in digital technologies.

” As such, the W20 urges the G20 and others to focus on initiatives that will increase women's and girls' access to digital technology, especially in remote and rural areas, by investing in infrastructure, high-speed connectivity and training to improve skills.

THE G20 CAN LEAD THE WAY

Specifically, the W20 recommends the following three actions:

01

// Improve digital access

for excluded groups such as women and girls, noting the need for better ICT support to enable remote, home and flexible working – especially in rural areas. Businesses and philanthropists could respond to this call to arms by providing free tools (i.e. both hardware and software) or ICT support to digitally-excluded groups, and by supporting initiatives such as the EQUALS Global Partnership²¹.

02

// Drive up digital literacy and fluency

by ensuring women and men are equally represented within STEM education subjects and within technology jobs – including careers in frontier technologies such as AI. Public and private-sector organizations could greatly accelerate this change if they were meaningfully incentivized to provide funding and opportunities to women and girls.

03

// Apply a gender lens to measure the digital economy

by tracking the impact of AI- and tech-led shifts in the demand for jobs, skills, and growth for women. It is impossible to address a problem if you cannot properly and accurately measure it, and so we must develop not only the metrics – but also the political appetite – to hold ourselves accountable for the gender digital divide.

” The W20 hopes that by promoting these and other measures – and through advocating for proactive changes when it comes to philanthropy, incentivization and political willingness – the world can not only mitigate the very real threats posed by COVID-19 to the equitable digital inclusion of women, but can also generate forward momentum around this key issue.





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