

GSMA Input into Report on the Digital Gender Divide

February 2017

The Challenge

There are 3.6 billion mobile internet users around the world¹, with mobile now the primary way in which many gain access to the internet. Despite increases in mobile access and use, a gender gap remains. Our research² on mobile ownership and use in low- and middle-income countries found that:

- Women on average are 14% less likely to own a mobile phone than a man, which translates into 200 million fewer women than men owning mobile phones.
- Women in South Asia are 38% less likely to own a phone than a man, highlighting that the gender gap in mobile phone ownership is wider in certain parts of the world.
- Even when women own mobile phones, there is a significant gender gap in mobile phone usage, which prevents them from reaping the full benefits of mobile phone ownership. Women report using phones less frequently and intensively than men, especially for more sophisticated services such as mobile internet.
- The top 5 barriers to women owning and using mobile phones from a customer perspective are cost, network quality and coverage, security and harassment, operator/agent trust, and technical literacy and confidence. Social norms and disparities between men and women in terms of education and income influence women's access to and use of mobile technology, and often contribute to women experiencing barriers to mobile phone ownership and use more acutely than men.
- In addition to the barriers experienced by female customers above, two other key systemic barriers arose – lack of gender disaggregated data and focus on women's access to and use of technology.

Taken together, these findings indicate the gender gap in mobile ownership and use is driven by a complex set of socio-economic and cultural barriers negatively affecting women. Without targeted intervention from the mobile industry, policy-makers, and other stakeholders, the gender gap in ownership and use is unlikely to close naturally on its own.

To address the digital gender divide there is a need to address issues of gender equality and social norms as well as focus on addressing the barriers to women's access and participation:

- **Accessibility:** This includes access to quality network coverage, handsets, electricity and formal IDs. For many women, access to mobile and digital services is limited by the inadequate availability of networks in developing countries, particularly in rural areas. Lack of connectivity should also be understood within a wider range of access challenges that women face, including the lack of reliable electric power for charging digital devices and difficulties in obtaining the identity documents required to purchase and register SIM cards and data plans.

¹ GSMA Intelligence, Q4 2014

² "ICT Facts and Figures", ITU, 2016

- **Affordability:** Connectivity and device costs have a significant effect on women's ability to benefit from digital services, as women often have lower incomes, less financial independence, and limited access to external sources of finance. As a result, women in many countries are more likely to have access to poorer quality devices and to obtain these later than their male peers.
- **Usability and skills:** In many countries, women are less likely to be literate and more likely to have limited educational experience than men. This often translates into women being less confident and able to use mobile handsets and the internet. Products and services are also often not designed with the less literate and less digitally savvy in-mind.
- **Safety:** Fears concerning safety and harassment are important barriers that inhibit some women from benefitting from or even wanting to access and use mobile phones and the internet. This includes concerns that they may be at risk of harassment and intimidation as well as vulnerability to theft with respect to the devices they own or borrow. These may inhibit women from using and benefitting from mobile phones and digital services and may impact on how women use them.
- **Relevance:** Policies and products are often not designed in ways that are relevant to women's needs and preferences. As a result, many women remain unaware of the value which digital services could contribute to their lives. A better understanding of how women use digital services, and what their needs are, should help policymakers, commercial interests and other stakeholders to improve the relevance of content, applications and services to women's needs. There can also be a lack of focus on potential female users in the design, testing and implementation of applications and services, and as a result many fail to benefit women.

Supporting the above there is a need for:

- **Gender-disaggregated data:** Gender-disaggregated data is currently limited despite such data being critical to understanding and measuring the digital gender gap and informing policy and business choices which can address it. Unless data is gender-disaggregated, gender differences are masked, a proper understanding of the reasons for gender gaps cannot be achieved, and inappropriate policy-making, targets, and business choices for stakeholders are more likely to result. It is important to understand the issues and contexts relevant to women's ability to access and use the internet and digital technologies. More detailed and consistent evidence concerning the digital gender gap is needed in order to inform policy and practice, particularly at national and sub-national levels.
- **Integration of a gender perspective in relevant policies and strategies:** Strategies, policies, plans and budgets that explicitly address women's needs, circumstances, capabilities and preferences are essential if governments, businesses and other stakeholders are to tackle the digital gender gap effectively. Such policies must reflect the diverse contexts of different countries and localities, and women's needs must be at the heart of policy and programme design, not incidental or supplementary to it.

GSMA has a focus on bridging the digital gender divide. Examples of our efforts include:

- [Connecting everyone and everything to a better future](#)

Since the first digital mobile phone call was made on the 1st July 1991, GSM networks have connected more people faster than any technology in history. These networks have boosted economies, transformed our communities and empowered people across the world. The power of mobile networks enables a unified purpose for all of us – connecting everyone and everything to a better future.

Our purpose is the driving force behind our industry’s commitment to playing the leading role in connecting the world and achieving the SDGs, which aim to end poverty, halt climate change and fight injustice and inequality. Access to the mobile internet is a defining moment in a community’s economic, social and political development.

- [GSMA Connected Women](#)

GSMA Connected Women aims to reduce the gender gap in mobile internet and mobile money services and unlock significant commercial and socio-economic opportunities. It works with mobile operators and their partners to address the barriers to women accessing and using mobile internet and mobile money services.

Through the [Connected Women Commitment initiative](#) mobile operators are driving an effort to reduce the gender gap in mobile internet and mobile money. They are making formal Commitments to increase the proportion of women in their mobile internet and/or mobile money customer base by 2020.

GSMA Connected Women also undertakes research on women’s access to and use of mobile, mobile internet and mobile money services. This is published on the GSMA Connected Women website. Our [“Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries”](#) study is one example of the research and sex-disaggregated data published on our website.

- [Broadband Commission](#)

Mats Granryd, GSMA Director General, is a Commissioner of the Broadband Commission and is Chair of the [Broadband Commission Working Group on the Digital Gender Divide](#). This Working Group is developing a set of recommended actions that can be adopted to help address the gender gap in internet and broadband access and use.

- [EQUALS](#)

GSMA is the coalition leader for the Access coalition of EQUALS (the Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age). The Access coalition is focused on helping ensure that women and girls have access to digital devices and services.