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CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Exciting Updates from WomenConnect Challenge Round One!



Launched in 2018 by Advisor to the President Ivanka Trump and USAID Administrator Mark Green, the WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) is a global call for solutions to improve women's participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the ways women and girls access and use technology. After two Challenge rounds, USAID has awarded over \$2.9 million to 12 grantees working to bridge the gender digital divide so that women can fully participate in the global economy.



The first round of WCC projects are all in mid-swing and demonstrating how technology can create new opportunities for women's empowerment in communities where they have otherwise faced restrictions to technology access and use.



The nine WCC projects in round one focus on addressing the social and cultural norms that keep women offline and under-empowered. In some cases, WCC awardees worked with the powerholders in communities to promote positive deviance in support of women's technology use. In other cases, women addressed societal concerns with technology to help spur economic growth, promote dissemination of information, and identify and discourage practices like gender-based violence, and female genital mutilation and cutting. WCC focuses on local solutions to close the gender digital divide, with an eye on interventions that could be replicated in other communities.



Through close partnership with local awardee teams and community members, WCC has been learning firsthand from these fearless innovators about what it takes to meaningfully shift the underlying cultural norms and structures that exacerbate the gender digital divide. This update will share some of the progress and achievements to-date and pave the way for evidence-based insights of how to close the gap for good.

Mali Health



This project leverages a locally developed voice-based social networking app to provide health information and market opportunities to women's cooperatives and savings groups in Bamako's peri-urban communities. The majority of group members are women living under the poverty line, including widows and those turned out by their families. As most women have low literacy levels and haven't been able to continue their education beyond primary school, there is a significant need for a rich visual voice-based interface that enables women to advertise their wares, connect with larger market opportunities, and access health information, all in their native language.

The Mali Health application launched in June 2019 to a pilot group of now 65 women who completed two rounds of user training and testing using their own or project-issued smartphones. Early feedback indicates ease in navigating the application and a high level of interest in on-demand health information that reduces the need to travel to local health centers and provides access to useful topics such as maternal healthcare, children's health, and vaccination schedules. In response to women's feedback, Mali Health added a feature where users can record their questions for a doctor and get voice responses back via their phone.

Women in the program have reported feeling more equal to men when armed with more information they want and need. In addition, we have seen that as husbands become more involved and better understand the potential benefits of this technology, they increasingly show support for their wives' use of the technology. When asked if technology could cause problems in a marriage, one cooperative member shared: ***"On the contrary, it brings us closer to our husbands. I share the health information I receive on my phone with my husband. One day, when I shared with him the messages on family planning and childhood vaccination, he told me this: I now understand that women can do good things with the phone. With this information, they [the women] will be useful to themselves and their children."***

Usability, utility, and the value of information exchange are at the heart of this project. Going forward, the program will continue to assess how the addition of this voice-based technology has affected livelihoods and levels of empowerment.

GAPI and Bluetown



In conjunction with technology partner Bluetown, GAPI-SI is bringing internet access and livelihood and entrepreneurial information to women in Ribaue, Mozambique through new innovative mechanisms, which focus on local content "clouds" that minimize airtime expenses and establish a rent-to-own cell phone model. Part of the GAPI-SI curriculum focuses on addressing cultural barriers around controlling women's access to technology and how they spend their time.

GAPI-SI's Women in the Network program was launched with national press coverage at the beginning of October, with participation from the local USAID mission. With the network and local cloud now live, GAPI will deploy an all-women team of tech-savvy community members trained to support their peers in learning how to use the cloud and access useful information online. Through this innovative and locally-rooted approach, GAPI and Bluetown aim to reach 2000 women and provide them with the digital tools and knowledge needed to drive better health, education, and livelihood outcomes for themselves and their families.

GramVaani



In the Nalanda District of Bihar, India, women utilize IVR and a mobile application to power a voice-based community media platform Meri Awaz Meri Pehchan ("My Voice My Identity") that fosters peer learning and collective action among users. Women create and share news on topics such as early marriage, dowry, and water availability, and can use the platform to safely express their concerns and discuss collective solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Women across communities and age ranges are trained as reporters and sent to more remote villages to help spread important development information. Some of the most popular content is that on government programs that primarily affect those with grievances or disabilities, widows, and other marginalized people from the lowest castes. Reporters create voice messages on an IVR system that recipients can comment on, save, play for others, and forward with or without annotation. In many cases, women work together to advocate for change and to let their voices be heard by local decision makers; in one community, the mayor has used the platform to directly connect with women and solicit their feedback on community development strategies. Meri Awaz Meri Pehchan listeners have reported using the platform to help convince their husbands to continue education for their daughters, delay early arranged marriages until girls have obtained some level of education, gain access to beneficial government programs, and to improve their lives in other ways.



Viamo's Calling all Women program is using Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to bridge literacy, language, and other access gaps in Tanzania and Pakistan. To date, Viamo's free IVR-based information service, the **3-2-1 Service**, has delivered locally tailored content, on-demand, to over 150,000 individuals across both countries. Topics are delivered in local languages using relevant examples on subjects ranging from digital and financial literacy to health and hygiene. Viamo is also focused on teaching rudimentary, entry-level mobile phone and internet basics over IVR, with the intent of reducing the digital literacy barrier experienced by so many women.

Viamo's baseline survey effort in both countries showed how fractious women's access to mobile phones is producing far more detailed and nuanced data than national gender gap studies. In Tanzania, a third of women reported that they must always gain permission from a male family member before using a mobile phone; conversely, a third responded that they never have to get permission. In Pakistan, the team faced significant challenges accessing women via a phone-based survey – out of 30,000 attempted calls, they were only able to reach 158 female respondents. Even though the outreach list was comprised of female users, based on telecom data, men

were picking up the phone and often would not agree to pass the phone to women in the house when requested. These insights and data provide a much more accurate sense of women's realities, which Viamo is using to adapt their content delivery methods and ensure they are reaching women in these communities with vital tools and information.



In their project #LetGirlsMap, HOT is training young women and vocal male allies in Tanzania and Peru to use mobile-based mapping platforms and crowdsourcing to surface issues that are preventing women from reaching their full potential.

HOT, with partners YouthMappers and the Tanzania Development Trust, aims to use data mapping to reduce gender-based violence and empower women economically in Tanzania. They have trained women in 78 villages and set up a network for local digital champions and female leaders to learn technological skills including how to map local data and report instances of gender-based violence within their communities. In a country where women face significant barriers to accessing technology, HOT is investing in capacity building of local women so that they can advocate for change within their own community. Learn more about the impact mapping is having in one Tanzanian community in the WCC-produced **video** and **blog** titled "A Refuge for Rosie."

In Peru, HOT partners with YouthMappers and schools to train students to use new mapping and surveying tools. Students go out into their communities to survey people's mindsets and attitudes on topics like gender-based violence, opinions on the culture of machismo, and women's participation in labor markets. This learning approach empowers students to question gender norms and inequality through technology and digital maps. One 15-year old student shared:

"The project is helping us to all have rights. It's helped me to be able to put myself in the shoes of others to build a better world. I hope my mapping project helps develop gender equality, but also economic equality as well."

Through #LetGirlsMap, female mappers feel empowered and supported in areas where leaders are not typically female, setting an example for the whole community.

Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) India at Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR)



In India, there are currently significant gender gaps in the adoption and use of mobile technology: 59 percent of women own a mobile phone – compared to 80 percent of men – and women are less than half as likely to use mobile Internet or own a smartphone. Past research points to social norms as playing an important role: many families see phones as an unwelcome distraction that exposes women to ideas and individuals that may threaten their purity and traditional role as caregiver.

In this project, EPoD India is providing in-person training and IVR-based information about government programs and benefits to very poor rural women around Raipur, Chhattisgarh, in communities where caste and mobility make it difficult for women to access important government services. EPoD's program, Mor Awaaz, is leveraging a government-led two million mobile phone give away to rural women to make women's use of phones more socially acceptable in communities where their access and ability to own phones are often limited. EPoD is assessing what kinds of acceptable use cases exist - or can be created - to catalyze women's use of phones, as many women do not think technology is applicable to their lives.

To date, nearly 11,000 women from 180 villages have completed digital literacy training and enrolled in the Mor Awaaz service. Through a rigorous randomized control trial, EPoD is determining which training packages, information, and incentives are most effective and will lead to the highest retention of knowledge and phones. In addition to evaluating program effects on women's social and economic opportunities, EPoD is also evaluating the program's intermediate impacts on mobile access, specifically by measuring the gender of respondents that pick up post-training Mor Awaaz calls. EPoD is also experimenting with a machine-learning algorithm that detects female or male voices to collect anecdotal data on gender-based phone dynamics within the household. This project has great potential for scalability as it aims to answer, with a high level of accuracy, what package of services is most effective at supporting norms that lead to greater and freer digital access for women in India.

AFCHIX



AFCHIX is creating four women-led community networks (CNs) to bring internet services to their home communities where network connectivity was either non-existent or too cost-prohibitive to be accessible. These CNs in Kenya, Namibia, Morocco, and Senegal are run by women's collectives that not only manage the technical aspects of the network, but work with regulators, create information and communications technology (ICT) training programs, and hope to eventually develop internet-based enterprises.

Over the last year, the local teams have worked to train CN leaders and establish key partnerships with regulators, equipment suppliers, schools, and local governments to build community buy-in and setup the physical infrastructure for the networks. As a result, three of the four CNs launched with the final site, Namibia, scheduled to go live next month. While network coverage ranges by country, current setups are reaching thousands of households within a half to one mile radius and are poised for scale. Through training, women CN leaders are obtaining technical skills and applying their newfound knowledge to maintain this internet infrastructure. One female trainee shared:

“This was my first technical training. I used to believe that it was only men who had to know about technical things but now I am confident, and I would like to learn more. I have the courage to climb up the roof to support the installation of solar equipment or to help in troubleshooting.”

With women at the helm of bringing last-mile connectivity solutions to their communities, they are serving as role models, creating new social norms, and demonstrating how women's tech empowerment can benefit all.

Equal Access International



In northern Nigeria, morality and fear of moral decline is frequently used as a justification for restricting women and girls' access to technology and the internet. Using the WCC grant, the Tech4Families program is combining media and community mobilization to convene families and Muslim clerics to combat negative norms and promote social and religious justifications for women's use of the internet. A twelve-part radio program to explore these issues launched in August and is expected to reach an audience of well over nine million over the course of the broadcasts.

Tech4Families designed the radio program with insights from community-based research, experienced local scriptwriters, and an expert content advisory group. Each 30-minute episode includes a drama segment, which explores a topic in a culturally appropriate way, and a discussion segment, which brings in locally respected experts and leaders to share their views. Weekly themes include: understanding the internet, common misperceptions and attitudes surrounding the internet, moral and religious arguments surrounding women and the internet, and internet safety and security.

Understanding that the family unit is central to sustainably shifting perceptions and practices around tech access for women and girls, Tech4Families is convening 15 families (75 individuals) to participate in Listening Discussion and Action Groups. Following a unique curriculum designed specifically for this project, these groups will partake in a series of facilitated sessions over eight months to engage more deeply with the radio program content, critically reflect on the issues raised, and build their skills and knowledge of technology in a safe environment. Feedback and insights from these learning groups will reveal to what extent the program is helping to break down myths, challenge oppressive norms, promote access to technology, build skills, and destigmatize and normalize women and girls' use of digital technology.

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)



In the Dominican Republic, low-income women disproportionately are denied access to credit because they lack credit history, formal earnings, and property rights. In partnership with a financial institution that offers mobile financial services to its customers, IPA and researchers from Northwestern University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the World Bank are using mobile data to test new credit-scoring models. In addition to new and richer individualized data, the models determine the best predictors of creditworthiness for men and women separately, making it possible for women to gain a credit score.

With the help of the WCC grant, as well as funding from CEGA's Digital Credit Observatory (funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), the UN Foundation, and the World Bank, IPA has been training and testing their new machine learning gender-differentiated credit scoring algorithm and gathering the necessary big data so that the algorithm can accurately assess the creditworthiness of low-income women without credit histories. Their preliminary results already show a substantial improvement over traditional credit scoring models that pool data for women and men. This translates into more women being classified as eligible to access credit than before. Additionally, insights from IPA's focus groups show that this improved access to credit will be used by women for entrepreneurial activities and to meet health, food security, and educational needs in the household.

This innovation has enormous potential for scalability through its use of digital technology to improve women's access to financing and provide the resources they need to fully participate in the global economy.