



Mawingu



CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

THE PROBLEM

Women face critical barriers to accessing the Internet including poor connectivity, high connection costs, and a lack of awareness about the benefits of joining the digital world. Kenyan company Mawingu Networks is addressing these barriers by providing Internet connectivity to the most underserved areas in Africa. They are providing over 300,000 users in Central and Northern Kenya with affordable and reliable Internet access for as little as \$0.04 a month.

Mawingu is expanding inclusive service offerings to women across areas of coverage. These interventions include dramatically reducing costs for access, providing appropriate digital content adapted to specific local needs, and creating safe “women only” online forums to share digital experiences and build digital skills. Now, Mawingu has partnered with the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative to bring these learnings to the Rift Valley region of Kenya, specifically the towns of Naivasha and Narok, densely populated areas which could benefit from Mawingu’s services.

THE PROJECT

Through the partnership, the company is deploying its merchant model to encourage entrepreneurs to host public Wi-Fi hotspots at their homes and businesses and act as vendors for Mawingu Internet bundles while also earning commissions for their sales. After identifying more than 350 entrepreneurs as possible hotspot merchants in Narok, Gigil, Kasarani, and Karagita, Mawingu successfully installed 299 hotspots: 171 with female merchants (57 percent), and 128 with male merchants (43 percent). All hotspot entrepreneurs received training on how to sell Internet data bundles, how to use Wi-Fi to improve their businesses, and how to attract customers, thereby increasing sales with additional foot traffic. The company realized that the location of public Wi-Fi hotspots would be an important factor in determining which demographic group benefits from the Internet access. Reliability, Internet speed, and affordability are also key factors that influence how women with Internet access are willing and able to use that connectivity. As a result, they chose locations that would be most convenient for women, such as retail shops, specific residential areas, and salons. To serve female hotspot customers, Mawingu created a safe, “women only” forum to provide targeted skills training and business education as well as encourage women-to-women networking on a peer-based platform. The organization rolled out their Digital Biashara Network (DBN)—with “Biashara” meaning “business” in Swahili—which acts as a hybrid online-offline community for women entrepreneurs, operationalized by Mawingu data merchants.

Mawingu partnered with Shujaaz Inc., a multi-media company that creates social change content, to host this network on their existing Mesh online community platform and created a training program based on merchants’ business learning needs. The modules include content regarding financial management, marketing and sales, and customer service. Mawingu also created a Digital Biashara Advisory (DBA) group of influential female data vendors who promote beneficial content pertaining to the DBN among women in their community on topics such as agribusiness, entrepreneurship, and reproductive health.



THE RESULTS

After an in-depth analysis of the hotspot economics and sustainability of the model, Mawingu discovered that the hotspots would not be sustainable with their current revenue generation and gross margin. However, Mawingu took away several key learnings from the project:

1. **Users are most attracted to free or cheap data. Therefore, price is a major barrier to access.** From July-October 2021, Mawingu offered free Internet access to residents located close to the hotspots. In total, 30,981 users registered for the Internet access during this time, over 10,880 of which were women. However, Mawingu saw a decrease of more than 90 percent in hotspot usage after the free trial ended.
2. **Previously, the user journey to purchase Internet bundles was cumbersome and not user-friendly.** Additionally, entrepreneurs struggled to use and adapt to the Mesh platform, which resulted in low engagement online. Software needs to be easily navigable and intuitive to serve customers with varying levels of digital literacy.
3. **While digital training is scalable and economical, the connections made in face-to-face meetings help to solidify commitment towards the program.** In-person training sessions, though time and resource intensive, allowed for better interactions especially for those who could not join online. Training needs to be flexible and held at convenient times for merchants and take their busy work schedules into consideration. Online training sessions may act as a complementary service, but should not be the primary means of teaching. Merchants demonstrated that they would watch and revisit online sessions in their own time if given the opportunity.

Based on learnings from implementation through 2021, Mawingu introduced a new pricing model, which allows users to purchase daily, weekly, and monthly bundles, giving them more data at lower rates in line with competing service providers. Mawingu also improved their user interface, making it possible to segment users by region and gender while improving the rate of new registered users by 20 percent. Mawingu will continue to utilize their DBN with the assistance and availability of the DBAs to continue visiting and training merchants and users.

This project endeavored to discover and validate a new operating mechanism for Mawingu's Wi-Fi business that a "Women First" model could be strategically and commercially advantageous for the business. Through the lessons incorporated in this program, Mawingu has successfully defined the economics of their hotspot model for these areas and mapped a new path for self-sustainability while working to bridge the gender digital divide.

Mawingu's work advances the overarching goal of the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative to bring meaningful connectivity to more women around the world. To learn more about the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, click [here](#).



TOTAL NUMBER OF FEMALE MERCHANTS/ ENTREPRENEURS TRAINED:

91



TOTAL NUMBER OF FEMALE MERCHANTS/ ENTREPRENEURS WITH MAWINGU HOTSPOTS INSTALLED:

153



TOTAL NUMBER OF WOMEN REACHED:

11,809

Figures between June 2021 and July 2022