

SUCCESS STORY

Leading USAID's Efforts in Closing the Gender Digital Divide



Photo credit: Mosaab Elshamy for DAI

Achieving women's equality can promote global prosperity. Yet, with the rise of new technologies and the dependence on connectivity, the gender digital divide has introduced a new obstacle that is impeding progress in advancing women's empowerment. Despite the increase in development efforts to bring more women online, the divide remains significant, with the International Telecommunication Union reporting 259 million fewer women having access to the Internet than men.¹

The significance of connectivity for women is undeniable, increasing empowerment and access to a world of opportunities and valuable resources that can improve their quality of life. But it's important to recognize that this is a complex and gradual process that calls for collaboration between governments, donors, and implementing partners.

DIGITAL FRONTIERS: STRENGTHENING USAID'S GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE PORTFOLIO

Over the past six years, Digital Frontiers has supported the U.S. government in its commitment to promote digital inclusion and close the gender digital divide. Together with USAID's Innovation, Technology, and Research (ITR) Hub and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GenDev) Hub, Digital Frontiers has sought to establish a blueprint for the future of gender and ICT programming at the agency. In 2019, the project partnered with USAID's Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W-GDP) to launch several initiatives aimed at advancing women's access to technology.



The [WomenConnect Challenge \(WCC\)](#) is a global call for solutions to improve women's participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the ways women access and use technology. WCC was created to inspire, uncover, and develop effective, culturally appropriate interventions that target the root causes of the gender digital divide.

SINCE 2018, USAID HAS WORKED WITH

16

WCC GRANTEES TO ADDRESS BARRIERS LIMITING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND TO CONNECT NEARLY **6 MILLION WOMEN IN 16 COUNTRIES.**



Photo Credit: Narendra Shrestha for DAI

1. [Facts and Figures 2022: Latest on global connectivity amid economic downturn - ITU Hub](#)



Photo Credit: Narendra Shrestha for DAI

Through a partnership with Reliance Foundation, USAID also launched the [WomenConnect Challenge India](#) to support new pathways for women and girls in India to engage with technology, counter outdated social norms, and increase their economic independence.



USAID AND RELIANCE HAVE WORKED WITH

17 WCC GRANTEES ACROSS INDIA, DISTRIBUTING OVER **\$1.9 MILLION TO 17 WINNERS** OVER THE COURSE OF TWO ROUNDS.



The [USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative](#) is a public-private partnership that seeks to bring Internet access to more women around the world, expanding women's economic opportunities and enabling digital development services.

Working with six local internet service providers and technology companies across five countries, the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative has reached

298,267

WOMEN WITH INTERNET ACCESS AND TRAINED **19,186 WOMEN ACROSS THE WORLD.**



Photo Credit: Anditel

[Mastercard's Start Path Empodera](#) seeks to advance women's economic opportunities and to foster a more inclusive digital economy through a program designed to support early-stage, female-founded ventures and inspire a new generation of female entrepreneurs in Latin America.

MORE THAN

\$1.4 million

WAS DISTRIBUTED IN GRANT FUNDING TO **40 WOMEN-LED VENTURES** IN COLOMBIA, PERU, AND ECUADOR.

AND THE ENTERPRISES THAT WENT THROUGH THE START PATH EMPODERA PROGRAM SAW AN INCREASE IN THEIR SALES BY GAINING **105,000 NEW CUSTOMERS.**



Photo Credit: Start Path



Mastercard's [Project Kirana](#) is a business development and digital literacy program aimed at India's growing class of women Kirana owners. The program focused on building financial and digital literacy skills, improving basic business management skills, and addressing cultural and other barriers to women becoming successful Kirana entrepreneurs.

PROJECT KIRANA PROVIDED TRAINING SERVICES TO OVER

2,400 women

MANAGING SMALL BUSINESSES IN THE CITIES OF LUCKNOW AND KANPUR AND FACILITATED ACCESS TO LOANS FOR MORE THAN **130 WOMEN KIRANA ENTREPRENEURS.**



Photo Credit: Viktoria Baskin-Coffey

Building on the learnings that emerged from these initiatives, Digital Frontiers developed multiple resources for the wider development community to utilize and learn from. A few resources to highlight are:

- [Five Proven Strategies to Close the Gender Digital Divide](#)
- [How to Bring More Women Online: A Practical Guide for Internet Service Providers and Technology Companies](#)
- [Gender Digital Divide Primer](#)
- Video playlist: [Understanding the Gender Digital Divide](#)

WHAT'S NEXT: WIDEF AND THE NEXT PHASE OF EFFECTIVE GENDER PROGRAMMING

With these initiatives coming to an end, their impact on the future of USAID gender programming continues. In March 2023, the White House launched the Women in Digital Economy Fund (WiDEF), a joint effort between USAID and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to accelerate progress on closing the gender digital divide by scaling evidence-based, proven solutions.



The WiDEF announcement builds on years of programming dedicated to expanding access and connecting more women. The support that Digital Frontiers has provided in advancing USAID's gender portfolio has been monumental in the progress we've made so far. What we've learned through initiatives like the WomenConnect Challenge and the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative has helped us establish a strong foundation which will guide our work under WiDEF moving forward as we seek to improve women's livelihoods, economic security, and resilience."

-Lauren Grubbs, Women in the Digital Economy Fund AOR