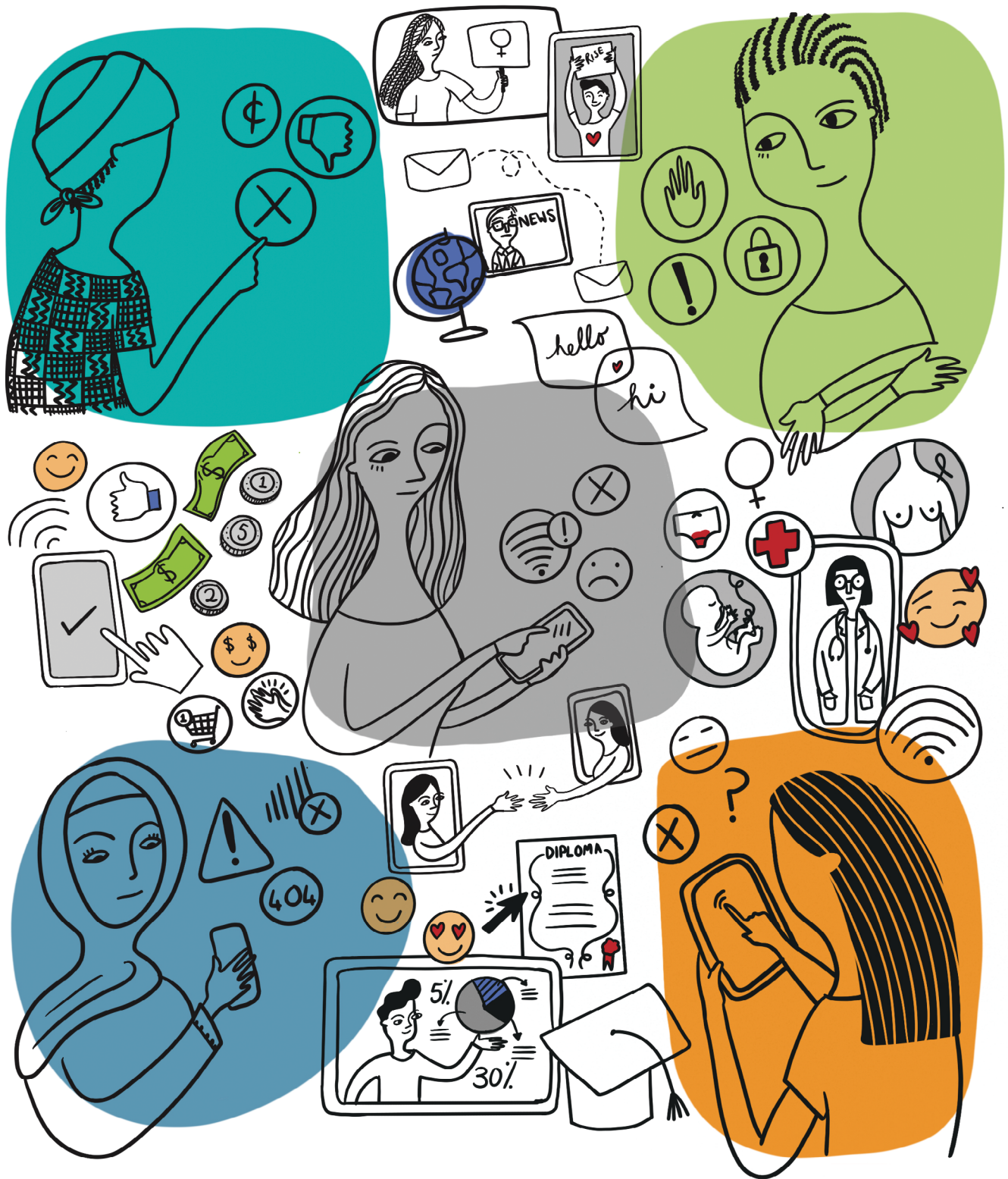


# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## WOMEN'S RIGHTS ONLINE

Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world

October 2020



**WORLD WIDE WEB**  
FOUNDATION

This report provides a global snapshot of the state of digital gender inequality and illustrates the barriers that women face in accessing and using the internet.



**T**he internet, with its great potential for economic opportunity and social empowerment, has long been celebrated as a force for greater equality — breaking down barriers for those previously held back by their geography, wealth, race, class and gender. But while digital connectivity has improved life for billions of people, it is falling short on its promise to beat back inequality.

While disappointing, this is unsurprising. Digital inequality is both a consequence, and a cause, of broader inequalities. Typically marginalised groups are less likely to have internet access and when they are online they face additional challenges in using the internet to its full potential. If we're to achieve our goal of building a better, fairer digital future, that must change.

Around the world, fewer women than men use the internet. Web Foundation analysis has found [men are 21% more likely to be online than women](#) — rising to 52% in the world's least developed countries (LDCs). And this gender gap in internet access continues to grow. [Data from the International Telecommunications Union \(ITU\)](#) suggests that globally it has increased by 55% between 2013 to 2019.

The gap in internet access is just one element of a much greater digital gender divide. This divide includes all of the ways that women are less able to use and influence the technology that is reshaping our world. There are many ways the internet we have today is not working equally well for men and women, from gaps in quality of connectivity and digital skills, to the threats that disproportionately impact the safety and rights of women and girls — all of which prevent women from fully benefiting from the opportunities that digital technology offers.

### **Left unchallenged, the growing divide threatens progress on gender equality.**

The internet is one of the most empowering technologies the world has ever seen, but unless women are equally able to benefit from it, the gender divide risks driving further inequality.

## **Evidence from four countries across three regions**

There is a need for greater research in this space to deepen our understanding of the digital gender divide and to shape the policy responses needed to close it. This report, building on [previous research](#) from the Web Foundation, contributes new evidence about women's experiences online from Global South countries. We surveyed almost 10,000 women and men across four countries — Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia and Uganda — to find out whether and how they use the internet, and their experiences using the internet. The surveys are complemented by qualitative focus groups with women and men and key informant interviews with government and civil society representatives.

## This is what we found:

### Internet access and meaningful connectivity

#### ► Encouraging results on basic internet access:


**access:** The gender gap in basic internet access in these countries was largely positive. Our survey found all countries besides Uganda had far smaller gaps than global figures. In Ghana, the gender gap in internet access was just 5.8%, while Colombia and Indonesia were near-parity. Uganda has further to go with a gender gap of 43%, though this is still lower than the regional average for Africa of 49.6%<sup>1</sup>.


#### ► Women experience a second-rate internet:

In this report we go beyond basic access to understand the quality of internet people have, using the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) [Meaningful Connectivity Target](#) to measure these countries against minimum thresholds for regular access, an appropriate device, enough data and a fast connection. When using this more robust measure of access, gender gaps reappear. In Colombia and Ghana, which both have small gender gaps in basic access, the gap in meaningful connectivity was 17% and 14% respectively. Given that important online tasks increasingly demand more bandwidth, reducing the gender gap in meaningful connectivity must be the goal for governments that are committed to digital equality.

► **Multiple barriers to internet access:** We asked participants about some of the barriers preventing or limiting their internet use. Their answers included time and financial constraints, poor service availability and quality, and a lack of digital skills.



 **The affordability of data** emerged as one of the biggest factors, with 25% of respondents saying the cost of data packages kept them offline or limited their use. This is in line with A4AI findings that the [cost of data](#) and [devices](#) is keeping people offline in great numbers. Among internet users in rural areas, women were 14% more likely than men to say cost limited how much they could use the internet.

 **A lack of digital skills was also ranked highly as a barrier to access**, with 45% of non-internet users citing this as a key reason they do not use the internet. Digital literacy was a particular barrier for women in rural areas, with half of non internet users saying a lack of know-how kept them offline, compared with 45% of rural men.

### Women's experiences using the internet

**Our survey found women are less likely to be creators of content when they do get online.** Men were far more likely to engage in a range of online activities, including:



**Posting comments** about political, social or economic issues (men 29% more likely).



**Selling products** or advertising a service (men 29% more likely).



**Publishing a blog post** (men 22% more likely).

1. The regional connectivity gender gap for Africa is 49.6% based on our [women-centered analysis](#) of ITU data.



*“COVID-19 has been the most disruptive global force in a generation. And where there is disruption, there is the potential to rebuild, reimagine, and create a radically better world. We can allow the coronavirus crisis to reinforce the worst impacts of the digital gender divide; or we can use the crisis to accelerate change, expand horizons, and get millions of girls and women online.” — UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka & Plan international CEO Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen*

**Relevant content is critical to encourage people to use the web. Without women's full participation as creators, the internet will continue to be built with a bias towards male perspectives and miss out on the full knowledge, talent and contributions of all of society.**

With fewer women on the internet, and women less likely to create online content, there is a shortage of women-created content to engage other women and encourage them to stay online and create content themselves.

► **Women are more concerned about their privacy online.** Across a range of personal data categories, we found women more concerned about their privacy than men, including private messages, home addresses and healthcare information. Focus group participants talked explicitly about the consequences of having their personal data misused, including experiencing and witnessing online harassment and online abuse, and that this increased online vulnerability means the right to privacy and data protection is particularly important.

► **Women have less trust in online companies.** Consistent with caring more about privacy issues, women were also more skeptical with regard to tech companies using their data responsibly. 54% of female respondents said they would not allow companies to use any of their data, compared with 47% of men. Focus group participants said their trust in companies was related to the degree of control they have when agreeing to terms of service, and they expressed frustration that companies offer an all-or-nothing approach to personal data. They also pointed out that the complexity of these terms of service means most people do not read them, raising questions about whether people understand what they're agreeing to with respect to companies' use of their data, particularly for users with lower levels of literacy.



## Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the critical importance of internet access in today's world while revealing the brutal inequalities along lines of wealth, geography, age and gender that leave some more vulnerable to the virus and its impacts. For the billions of women who have inadequate or zero internet access, being without this lifeline has devastating consequences. And as women play a disproportionate role as frontline workers, caregivers and educators, the gender gap has further costs for families, communities and economies.

**Everyone benefits when we close the digital gender divide. Digital equality is important not only for individual rights and empowerment, but also as a vital driver of economic growth and prosperity. Inclusive economies are stronger economies, and inclusive digital development will be critical as countries look to bounce back from the Covid-19 crisis.**

We urgently need to close the digital gender divide and make sure that women and girls are able to fully participate online without fear for their safety or their rights. Until we do, the internet will continue to work against progress on gender equality.

Digital technologies will not automatically empower marginalised people and break traditional power structures without long term investment and commitment to overcome existing inequalities online. This report highlights key areas, with specific steps, that governments and companies must focus on to enable a truly gender-inclusive digital world.



### Collect and publish gender data in the technology sector

To make policies that address the specific needs of women, decision makers need [gender disaggregated data, taking into account specific experiences of men and women](#). However, less than half of countries report data on the percentage of men and women using the internet and few countries collect any other gender ICT data. Governments should commit to collecting gender data on the technology sector regularly and to publishing it openly for others to use.



### Adopt Meaningful Connectivity as the target for internet use and tackle the gender gap

This report shows that the current definition used to measure internet use masks the true extent of the digital gender divide. The [meaningful connectivity](#) target gives a fuller picture of the quality of internet access people experience, and can help policymakers design better policies to close the digital gender gap and connect more people to a useful, empowering internet.



### Promote digital skills and ICT education for women and girls

Digital literacy is one of the biggest barriers to internet use and women and girls are most impacted by a lack of digital skills. This is influenced by factors such as education access, income inequality, access to digital devices, and cultural biases discouraging women and girls from using technology. Governments must invest in and promote digital skills and information and communication technology (ICT) education to encourage women and girls to use the internet, create content online and navigate the online world safely.



### Support women's participation in technology development, local content creation and ICT innovation

To close the digital gender gap, women must be equal digital creators and producers. Today, [women make up less than a third of professionals in the technology sector](#). If the majority of technology creators are men, the design of technology, products and services could be biased towards men. Companies might lack important perspectives to make policies, products and services that reach and benefit more people. Governments should develop national strategies to support technology education, innovation and leadership for women and girls so that their perspectives are reflected in the design and development of technology.



### Safeguard the online privacy of women and girls

Women and girls face disproportionate risks to their data rights online, particularly in the form of online abuse, harassment and threats of violence. This means that violation of women's personal data rights can have an exaggerated impact on their other human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and psychological and physical safety. Both governments and companies have a role to play to keep people safe by protecting the right to privacy — which in turn makes the web safer for women, and for everyone.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **AUTHORS:**

Report led by Chenai Chair, Ingrid Brudivg and Calum Cameron with support from Dhanaraj Thakur, Carlos Iglesias and Ana Rodriguez.

## **LOCAL PROJECT PARTNERS:**

**Colombia:** Olga Paz, Marcya Hernández, Beatriz Alarcón and Dana Beltrán (Colnodo)

**Indonesia:** Paksi Walandouw (Lemboga Demografi FE UI) & Widuri (ICTWatch)

**Ghana:** Richard Boateng (University of Ghana) & Jemilah Abdulai (Circumspecte)

**Uganda:** Hannington Obang (Uganda Communications Commission); Dr. Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo, Mrs. Marjorie Edith Kasozi Sseruwo, Mr. Francis Wasswa & Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Phillip Ayazika (Pollicy)

**Suggested citation:** World Wide Web Foundation (2020). Women's Rights Online: Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world. Web Foundation.

This report is made available under a [Creative Commons 4.0 International licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)  
For media or other inquiries: [press@webfoundation.org](mailto:press@webfoundation.org).



**WORLD WIDE WEB  
FOUNDATION**

World Wide Web Foundation, 1110 Vermont Ave  
NW, Suite 500, Washington DC 20005, USA

[www.webfoundation.org](http://www.webfoundation.org) | Twitter: [@webfoundation](https://twitter.com/webfoundation)