

Assessing gender dimensions of digital inequality for policy action

Alison Gillwald, Executive Director, Research ICT Africa network

Summary of text:

Despite gender and digitalization being priority issues on the global agenda, there is a significant lack of gender-disaggregated data for evidence-based digital policy formulation, without which there is little way of tracking progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and their ICT sub-targets. Much of the data which does exist is poor in terms of accuracy and granularity, resulting in inaccurate data which may be even more harmful than an absence of data.

Despite a reduction in access-related gender inequalities as more people come online, women still access the Internet at a lower rate than men, and women users remain more likely to harness the Internet for social and communicative purposes and less so for 'productive' purposes, such as working from home, online business activities, platform work and human capital development. The Research ICT Africa After Access survey in 2018 found that when a small business is owned by a woman, it reduces the probability of the enterprise using the Internet by six percent. The limited data available indicates a similar pattern in the case of girls, who are less likely than boys to own a mobile phone, use the Internet or access information .

A lack of application of the standard definitions for ICT indicators and methodologies for ICT data collection developed by the UN agency responsible for the collection of ICT indicators, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the need to conduct resource intensive demand side survey in order to be able to collect data in the predominantly pre-paid mobile markets in global South, has contributed to the dearth of sex-disaggregated data globally. This is compounded by the fact that country data provided to the ITU by developing countries is often limited and outdated. The collection of both qualitative and quantitative research data is critical to effective policy formulation. Similarly, the heterogeneity of women across different country settings and demographics must be understood and accounted for to identify the precise and multiple points of policy intervention required.

Key recommendations:

- To increase Internet usage among poor women, States should create enabling environments for the private and public delivery of digital public goods through low-risk policy experimentation, the crowding-in of productive private and community resources, and low regulatory transaction cost models which utilize unused spectrum, particularly in rural areas, and in resource allocation to the creation of digital commons .
- Impacted people and communities must be actively included in all processes of policy formulation, regulation and governance to ensure more equitable digital and data outcomes.
- Policies intended at reducing digital inequality must be transversal to account for the cross-cutting nature of digitalization. New policy proposals must undergo gender impact assessments to ensure they do not reinforce and perpetuate existing inequalities.
- Policy interventions should positively discriminate in favour of those who are at the intersections of multiple inequalities and most marginalized from the digital economy and society.. For example, subsidies and digital skills training programmes could be targeted towards women-owned microbusinesses.
- Global digital solidarity funding framework should be established to ensure the collection of digital statistics as public goods to inform evidence-based policy and global governance of digital public goods such as the Internet, data and cybersecurity.