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What Policies Do We Need to Make the Internet Affordable to All?

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[*] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Expert paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting
in preparation for the 67ᵗʰ session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67)

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1. **Introduction**

This brief paper, prepared for the Expert Group Meeting in preparation for the 67ᵗʰ session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67), addresses the following question: "what policies do we need to make the internet affordable to all?" It is largely based on work developed by the authors and their colleagues at the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), an initiative that advocates for and supports gender responsive policy reform. Through our research, policy advocacy and multi-stakeholder engagements and experiences, we center gender considerations and questions across all aspects of policy making and projects. We use this opportunity to highlight relevant research findings and share proposed approaches to increase the integration of gender considerations in policy making and consequently, achieve digital transformation outcomes that are gender responsive.

Only 51% of the world's population has basic internet access, as measured by the ITU (A4AI, 2022b). Across Africa, only 29% has basic access, and in West Africa specifically, 32% (A4AI, 2022b). Numbers are staggering low and incompatible with the increasing connectivity needs of individuals, governments and industries. Official documents at the national and international levels are generally still based on a binary definition of connectivity that is no longer sufficient or acceptable. Using the internet without proper speeds and/or data, without consistent access or an appropriate device - without a meaningful connection - is a problem that many face, especially rural women, and this has become even more evident throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given the limitations of basic internet access, A4AI developed the concept of meaningful connectivity to raise the bar for internet access. Policy actions must advance meaningful connectivity - one's ability to have daily access to the internet with an appropriate device, with enough data and a fast connection. By establishing clear minimum thresholds (see Figure 1 below) that guarantee quality

and reliability of user experience, the meaningful connectivity targets provide a path for policy makers to take action that will benefit everyone equally. In fact, measuring progress towards meaningful connectivity requires indicators to be disaggregated and assessed by gender (A4AI, 2021d).

Figure 1. Dimensions of Meaningful Connectivity
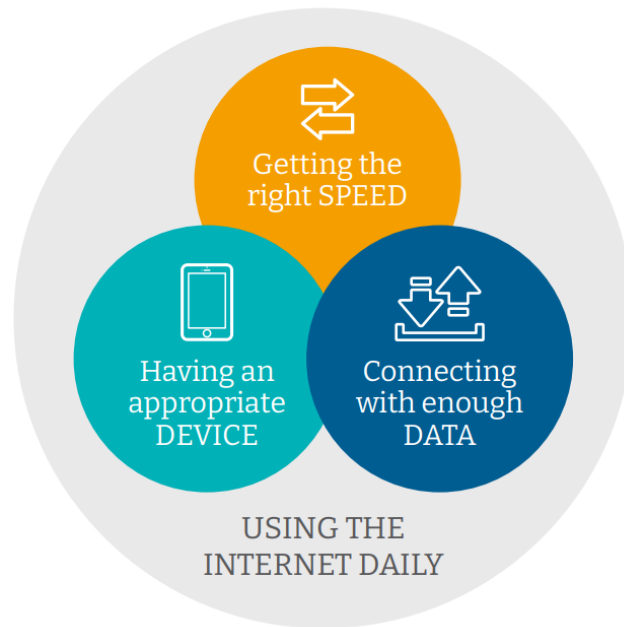
Source: A4AI, 2021b

Establishing concrete targets is key to advancing digital equality. Binary definitions of online and offline are still frequently used at the international and national levels. It is important to note that having meaningful access to the Internet depends not only on having meaningful connectivity, but also having affordable access and a supportive social environment, one that facilitates women and men's full ability and agency in their use of the Internet (Jorge and Woodhouse, 2022).[1]

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[1] Various organizations have embraced meaningful connectivity and advocate for meaningful access, including for example, the Internet Governance Forum's Policy Network on Meaningful Access (PNMA), as well as the ITU and the UN Tech Envoy through their work on the Global Digital Compact. See IGF's website for more information. https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/policy-network-on-meaningful-access-pnma

2. Meaningful connectivity and the digital gender gap

The gender gap related to internet connectivity remains largely unchanged since 2011, and has only dropped from 30.9% to 30.4%, half a percentage point (A4AI, 2021a). In 2021, A4AI published the research report "Costs of Exclusion: Economic Consequences of the Digital Gender Gap", aiming to call attention to the massive economic loss resulting from exclusion of women in the digital economy. This report, based on new research and analysis, identified that as result of the exclusion of women from the digital world, low and lower-middle income countries (LLMICs) have lost, over the last decade, $1 trillion USD in gross domestic product (GDP) due to the persistent gender gap in internet use (A4AI, 2021a). In 2020 only, USD126 billion in GDP was missed out, and $24 billion in annual tax revenue was missed out in the 32 LLMICs that were part of the study (A4AI, 2021a).

There are several dimensions to the digital divides that are currently seen across regions. Table 1 below provides estimates of meaningful connectivity, by country, geography, and gender across a number of countries. Based on A4AI's research, the gender and urban/rural gaps remain a key concern, and require urgent action by policy-makers and sector stakeholders alike.

Table 1. Estimates of meaningful connectivity, by country, geography, and gender

COUNTRY	NATIONAL	URBAN	RURAL	MEN	WOMEN
Colombia	26.2%	30.5%	7.6%	33.8%	19.2%
Ghana	6.5%	9.0%	2.8%	8.3%	4.8%
India	6.8%	9.0%	5.3%	9.8%	3.3%
Indonesia	12.7%	15.3%	9.1%	12.8%	10.4%
Kenya	10.9%	20.7%	6.5%	14.3%	7.7%
Mozambique	3.6%	6.7%	1.5%	4.2%	2.7%
Nigeria	12.1%	16.4%	6.6%	15.5%	7.2%
Rwanda	0.6%	1.9%	0.3%	0.5%	0.2%
South Africa	12.8%	15.9%	5.7%	16.4%	12.1%

Source: A4AI, Advancing Meaningful Connectivity: Towards Active and Participatory Digital Societies (2022)

The figure below reveals that digital inequalities are deeper in some countries. For example, South Africa and Colombia, and Ghana and Nigeria, are two pairs of countries with similar levels of internet use at the national level. Nonetheless, 13% of users in South Africa have meaningful connectivity compared to 26% in Colombia, and in Ghana, only 7% compared to 12% of Nigerians (A4AI, 2022a). Figure 2 also shows gender and urban/rural gaps in meaningful connectivity. We note that rural women's digital opportunity is generally affected both by gender based barriers as well as rural constraints.

Figure 2. Geography and gender gaps, by internet use and meaningful connectivity
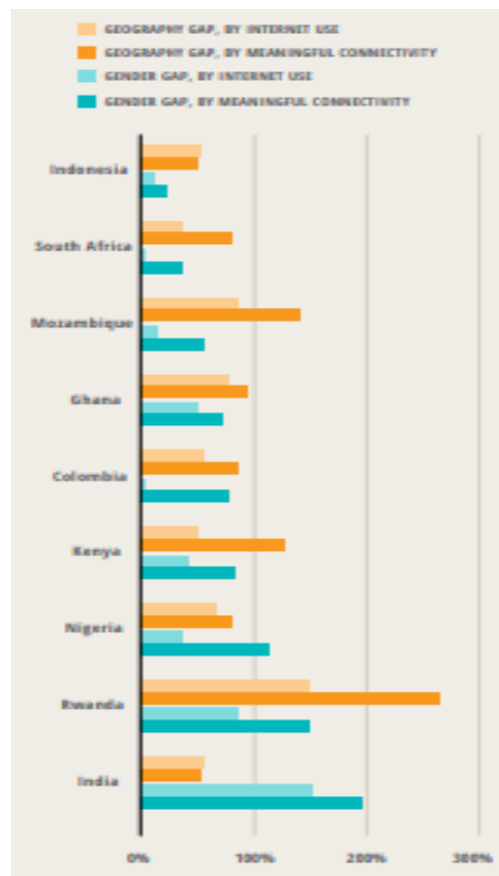
Source: A4AI, Advancing Meaningful Connectivity: Towards Active and Participatory Digital Societies (2022)

In some countries, such as Indonesia, Mozambique and South Africa, where digital gender gaps in basic internet use are low, gender gaps in meaningful connectivity are higher, as shown in Figure 2 (A4AI, 2022a). The gender gap in meaningful connectivity means that women are less likely to pursue educational contents and take online classes, book health appointments, or use online government

services. Gaps in literacy and skills also sideline women from fully enjoying all the opportunities the internet and digital services can provide.

It is important to emphasize that digital gender gaps are also the result of socio-economic and cultural barriers that prevent women from engaging freely and on their terms with online activities and services. A recent study by UN Women and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) states that 38% of women have experienced online violence, although only one in four have reported such violence to appropriate authorities (UN Women and UNDESA, 2022). This creates a scenario in which 90% of women limit what activities they do online (UN Women and UNDESA, 2022). Further, privacy has been a concern of women much more than for men, according to surveys in Colombia, Ghana and Uganda (UN Women and UNDESA, 2022).

3. **Policy aspects and brief recommendations**

   a. **Broadband Plans/Digital Strategies**

A large percentage of countries do not adequately address digital gender gaps through their policies and programs (A4AI, 2021b; A4AI, 2022a). This is a problem, as having clear strategies and targets facilitates the development and design of projects and interventions that aim to tackle these gaps and provide new digital opportunities. Clear time bound targets also require ongoing monitoring and measuring of progress, which keeps all involved accountable.

One country that has made considerable efforts to develop comprehensive policies addressing access and connectivity needs of women is Costa Rica, which has developed a gender strategy within its Ministry of Science, Technology and Telecommunications (A4AI, 2021b). Other countries should follow this example and develop gender responsive policies, including a Broadband Plan/Strategy with clear gender equality goals and specific gender targets.

> **Recommendation #1: Develop a Broadband Plan/Digital Strategy with gender equality goals and specific gender targets.**

b. Universal access and service funds (USAFs) and other digital development funds

Public funds such as the Universal Service and Access Funds (USAFs) are mechanisms that should be used to improve women's internet access, connectivity and use. Almost 38% of low- and middle-income countries do not have a USAF, and when they do, this opportunity remains largely untapped (A4AI, 2018, A4AI, 2021c).

Several countries have been proactive to subsidize the development and implementation of the type of initiatives and programs that support women's digital opportunity. In the Dominican Republic, the Dominican Telecommunication Institute (INDOTEL) has developed the project "Connect the Unconnected'' (Conectar a los No Conectados), which encompasses, among other things, demand-side subsidies targeting vulnerable households, particularly women as heads of households (A4AI, 2021c). In Colombia, the country's USAF (Fondo Único de las Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones - FUTIC) is being used to provide training related to technical skills and knowledge on the use of ICT for women (A4AI, 2021c). Others should learn from these experiences and develop country specific gender focused projects to be funded by these resources and other existing development funds (such as those supporting digital skills, community connectivity infrastructure, among others).

> **Recommendation #2: Universal access and service funds (USAFs) and other permanent funds should have specific goals and programs focused on closing the digital gender gap.**

c. Access to smartphones and laptop devices

Owning an appropriate device is a key aspect of having meaningful connectivity. Governments should be intentional in creating policies and programs that facilitate access to smartphone and laptop devices for women. Subsidizing smartphone and laptop devices is a good way to support women in reaching meaningful connectivity, and this is even more important for low income and underserved communities, such as those in rural areas (A4AI, 2021b).

Governments should support the development of business models that are innovative and beneficial to rural communities and women in general. Differentiated pricing arrangements and/or reduced tariff data plans can be incentivised and established by operators to support projects that aim to increase women's meaningful access and use of digital tools. (A4AI, 2021b). This is an example of how business models can support women in having meaningful connectivity, where the quality of the connection and the availability of a device on a daily basis are foundational.

Recommendation #3: Governments should be intentional in creating policies and programs that facilitate access and/or subsidize smartphones and laptop devices for women.

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d. Policy design processes and women-led initiatives

Participatory design in the policy process does not always accommodate women's perspectives. One important recommendation is to ensure that women and gender advocates are lead participants as "facilitators in community and other design sessions, hosting gender-balanced or, where necessary, women-only focus groups to get feedback, and setting out clear targets for effective participation from women, men, and other groups" (A4AI, 2018, p. 13). Increased participation informed by strong gender analysis is critical to ensure that gender considerations are taken into account and that policies and strategies address these persistent, yet unacceptable gaps. Women-led organizations and initiatives, such as community networks, which are either governed by women or with a strong presence of women, provide unique perspectives to the process. These and other women-led initiatives should be supported to participate in these processes (A4AI, 2021c).

Recommendation #4: Governments should include women and gender experts in the policy design processes, and should support women-led initiatives as active participants as well.

In addition to the recommendations highlighted above, there are clear paths for policy makers to move the debate forward and take action. A recently published Gender Policy Playbook provides guidance and a starting point for policy makers.

As the A4AI Cost of Exclusion Report noted: "Women already achieve incredible things in the digital economy. However, their experiences as content creators and entrepreneurs are more an exception than part of everyday life. Those who have been early leaders in their fields have been left vulnerable to scams and abuse. Millions have been left behind without sufficient support to access the internet, know how it works, or realize their full potential in using it. **If governments want to see a digital economy as a core engine to a post-Covid recovery, they must invest in gender-equitable foundations to include everyone."**

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