

»» Promoting gender equality by closing the digital gender divide

No 15, 10 August 2017



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Today, digital technologies are a key prerequisite for social, political and economic development. However, there is a "digital divide" not just between north and south, but also between the genders: by global comparison, women and girls have less access to digital technologies than men, lower application knowledge, and are under-represented in occupations related to information and communication technologies (ICT).

In developing countries for example, 16.8 % fewer women than men have access to the internet, women express their opinions online only half as much as men, and they use digital media much less frequently to create their own content. Only 24 % of all jobs in the digital sector are occupied by women. Some IT activities are even performed by men up to a level of 80 %.

Given these differences, it is not only more difficult for women to participate in social, economic and political life, but there is also a significant risk based on the growing significance of digital technologies that these gender-specific imbalances will get worse in the future.

Main causes of the gender-specific "digital divide"

- *Insufficient technical and digital knowledge* among women and girls prevents them from making extensive use of mobile telephones and the internet. Even if IT is taught in schools, it is often not compulsory. Girls take on electives much less frequently, partly because social norms expect them to pursue other activities, and partly because of inhibitions brought on by their poorer prior knowledge of IT. Learning autonomously in internet cafés for example (assuming these are even available) is also often hampered by socio-cultural safety concerns.

- *Lack of money* is a key barrier to more intensive use of digital media, particularly for girls and women from rural areas as well as those from lower-income groups. Women and girls often do not have unlimited authority over their own income or their household's income, and/or attach a greater priority to spending for purposes other than buying hardware/software or paying high user fees.

- *Less relevant online content for female users (particularly in local languages)* is another reason for the weak demand shown by women and girls for digital products and services.

Potential for multi-dimensional impacts on gender equality and development

Initiatives that aim to close the digital divide between the genders can give rise to positive synergies between the objectives of the 2030 Agenda: for example, measures to promote IT skills among women contribute not only to the achievement of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). In general, improving access to digital technologies strengthens the economic development of women, and thereby helps at a higher level to reduce poverty (SDG 1) and inequalities (SDG 10). From an economic perspective, using digital technologies has a tangible impact on incomes by means of better networking, simpler business relations and improved access to information (World Development Report 2016).

Accessing and using digital technologies has the potential to promote the networking, participation, say and income of women and girls. If they develop better digital skills, studies show that women tend to use digital media to design their own content and create their own business projects and jobs in the digital sector. In this respect there is great potential for the promotion of gender equality.

Approaches in international development cooperation

The analysis above reveals that the discrimination of girls and women in the IT sector is closely linked to traditional norms and role models, but is also marked by path dependencies (the small number of need-based products and services leads to weak interest and low demand). On the other hand, discrimination in the IT sector also deepens gender-specific inequalities and hinders sustainable development. The following measures in international development cooperation in particular are designed to break this self-reinforcing link:

- *Promoting school-based IT training* specifically for girls,
- *Promoting IT-related vocational programmes* specifically for girls and women,
- *Promoting the development of gender-specific content* and products/services online,
- *Promoting positive role-models with successful women in IT professions.*■