UNESCO’s input to the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the gender digital divide

UNESCO welcomes OHCHR’s initiative to prepare a report on ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective.

Following the publication of UNESCO’s study “Keystones to foster inclusive knowledge societies: access to information and knowledge, freedom of expression, privacy and ethics on a global Internet”, UNESCO member states have endorsed a concept called “Internet Universality”.

This concept is based on the promotion of the four R.O.A.M principles: Rights, Openness, Accessibility, and Multi-stakeholder participation. Bridging the digital gender divide is related to all these four dimensions.

In light of the **Human Rights-based** principle of Internet Universality, gender equality constitutes a fundamental element within Internet related rights and crosscuts with various other rights such as freedom of expression, privacy, cultural participation, freedom of association, security, education, etc. This principle reaffirms the crucial need for women and girls to equally enjoy all these rights on the Internet. The digital divide is also one of a divide about the enjoyment of rights, and this is a dimension that needs addressing. In particular, the various forms of online harassment of specifically women online is a key violation of their rights, and one which renders the Internet an unfriendly space for women. This situation can only perpetuate the digital divide between the sexes.

**Accessible to All** as a principle for “Internet Universality”, highlights the need to engage with social exclusions from the Internet based on factors such as gender, as well as other factors that often overlap with gender inequalities – namely, media and information literacy, language, class, and disability. By promoting **Openness** and **Multistakeholderism**, the “Internet Universality” framework facilitates open access to information by all actors, with sensitivity to gender differentials, and the recognition of the roles that different agents, especially women and girl, have played in governing the Internet. In other words, UNESCO’s position recognizes the knowledge and participatory divides that go hand in hand with digital divides and gender divides.

The concept of “Internet Universality”, which recognizes well the inter-relationships and inter-dependences between the four R.O.A.M principles, thus provides a comprehensive and powerful framework to guide different actions on bridging the digital gender divide in a concerted manner. Bridging the digital gender divide requires to not only strengthen women and girls’ full range of rights, but also to empower them with quality access and necessary capacities in media and information literacy and skills to use the Internet as well as fostering their active participation in the governance process.

UNESCO is embarking on indicators to assess the R.O.A.M principles on a country-by-country basis, and gender-disaggregation will be mainstreamed throughout these.

Regarding the concrete recommendations to address the gender gap, UNESCO is pleased to share some of the initial recommendations from a forthcoming report by the **Broadband Commission Working Group on the Digital Gender Divide, which is being launched in March.**

The Broadband Commission is convened by UNESCO and the International Telecommunications Union. The forthcoming document recommends 4 major actions for stakeholders to address the online Gender divide.

1. **Understand the context – sex-disaggregated data on internet access and use:**

* **Collect and analyze sex-disaggregated data, use the proper indicators** to measure it, make sure it is integrated in previous data collection 🡪 Governments, private sector, NGOs (support initiatives too), Inter-GOs (supporting states too), Academia.
* **Conduct research concerning women and girls’ access to the Internet** to better understand the needs and factors limiting their use 🡪 Government, NGOs, International-GOs, Academia, private sector (research on consumers).
* **Publish sex-disaggregated data** w/privacy considerations 🡪 Government, private sector, NGOs, International-GOs and Academia.
* **Ensure national data is collected in accordance with international guidelines,** relevant, used for the **development of policies** and is accessible 🡪 Government supported by International-GOs.
* Facilitate regular **international comparisons** between countries 🡪 International-GOs.

1. **Integrate a gender perspective in strategies, policies, plans and budgets:**

Women need to be at the heart of policy and program design, not incidental or supplementary.

Recommendations:

* **Include gender equality target** across ICTs’ strategies with clear accountability 🡪 government, NGOs, International-GOs (encourage states to do so).
* Ensure ICT access targets are **included in the policies** 🡪 Government.
* **Use gender analysis tools** to assess the policies and implementation plans. 🡪 Government, NGOs, International-GOs
* **Consult and involve** women, gender equality advocates and local communities. 🡪 Government, private sector, NGOs, International-GOs.
* **Private sector:** Make women part of the business strategy, set proper indicators, assess business strategies, policies and plans to ensure there’s a focus on women customer, promote policies ensuring gender equality.
* **NGOs:** Advocate for mainstreaming gender equality in all policies and budgets by stakeholders.
* **Academia:** Include a gender perspective in academic programs, analyze gender consideration in ICT policies, share the findings, and promote exchange and cooperation among academia.
* Provide guidance on how to integrate gender into Broadband plans by recommending best practices.

1. **address the barriers:**

Barriers to the use of the internet by women prevent them from realizing the full social and developmental value of the internet. These limits and recommendations towards them are detailed below:

* **affordable access:**

Women having limited financial independence are constrained by the internet accessibility costs as well as poor network coverage in certain geographical areas or those where women’s freedom of movement is limited.

Recommendations:

* **Develop strategies** (initiatives for NGOs) **for achieving affordable Internet access** for women based on an understanding of the affordability issues on the population. 🡪 Government, private sector, NGOs, Inter-IOs (support the states’ developing strategies).
* Academia: research and document the impact of affordability issues on the population and publish the reports.
* **Implement policy and regulatory measures to ensure data and devices are affordable** (Governments), design products and services that are affordable (private sector), support approaches ensuring lower costs (NGOs), support states’ initiatives (International-GOs).
* **Increase network coverage,** capacity, quality, infrastructures… (Government, supported by Inter-GOs, private sector), **design solutions** reducing costs (private sector) 🡪 NGOs: support all these efforts.
* **Support and invest in accessible & safe public access facilities** 🡪 Governments supported by NGOs and International-GOs.
* **threats that prevent access and use:**

Women: Harassment and violence fears while at the same time, the use of Internet enhances feeling of personal security.

Recommendations:

* **Conduct research on factors preventing** women from accessing the Internet 🡪 Governments, private sector (consumer insights research), NGOs, International-GOs, Academia (research to be published).
* **Increase awareness of the threats,** campaigns, programs 🡪 Governments, NGOs, Inter-GOs (advocacy role).
* Private sector: develop applications and services addressing these issues.
* Academia: motivate and train researchers on these issues.
* **Strengthen measures** (legal and policy frameworks) recognizing abuses (Government encouraged by Inter-GOs), develop ‘safe’ apps and report of online abuse (private sector with the government investing in initiatives), support measures making access Internet easy for women (NGOs).
* **digital literacy and confidence:**

Lower literacy rates for women mean an unequal access to the Internet and other ICTS.   
Recommendations:

* Invest in public education initiatives for women/girls 🡪 Government and private sector (customer education initiatives).
* NGOs and International-GOs: support capacity building initiatives.
* Academia: research digital literacy barriers and approaches for women’s internet access.
* Ensure that digital literacy and education initiatives consider women and girls’ needs, contexts… 🡪 Governments (supported by International-GOs), NGOs, private sector.
* Train teachers, educators and local leaders and provide women and girls with opportunities to develop their digital skills and confidence 🡪 Governments, private sector, NGOs, International-GOs, Academia (develop curricula too).
* Provide women and girls with opportunities to develop their digital skills and confidence 🡪 Government, private sector, NGOs, Inter-GOs.
* Develop online content and make it more accessible to women with limited literacy 🡪 Government, private sector, International-GOs, NGOs.
* Support and promote female role models as leaders, promote gender equality 🡪 Government, private sector, NGOs, International-GOs, Academia: increase the number of female teachers of ICT.
* Integrate ICT technical/literacy skills etc. in education that meet women’s interests 🡪 Government.
* **Relevant content, applications and services:**
* **Build awareness of the realistic potential benefits** achievable through women’s access to ICTs 🡪 Governments supported by International-GOs, private sector, NGOs, Academia (research + publishing reports).
* **Develop an ecosystem of services** which content is relevant to women/girls 🡪 Governments (supported by International-GOs), NGOs, and private sector.
* **Involve women from diverse backgrounds in content design** 🡪 Government, NGOs, private sector.

1. **Work together and share good practices and lessons:**

Cooperation between the different stakeholders is crucial to the development of policies promoting good practices:

* Tools and guidelines on the digital gender gap which can support national and international efforts have to be shared.
* Multi-stakeholder cooperation should be supported and encouraged: workshops, national meetings, stakeholders’ mobilization.

**Related documents and reports:**

UNESCO Internet Study “**Keystones to foster inclusive Knowledge Societies**”: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/internetstudy/>

UNESCO Series on Internet Freedom:

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/publications-by-series/unesco-series-on-internet-freedom/>

UNESCO Concept note on Internet Universality:

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/crosscutting-priorities/unesco-internet-study/internet-universality/>

ConnectingtheDots Outcome documents of UNESCO: <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/outcome_document.pdf>

BROADBAND COMMISSION WORKING GROUP ON THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE GENDER GAP IN INTERNET AND BROADBAND ACCESS AND USE (Forthcoming)