## Plan International, Inc.

## Input to OHCHR Report on Ways to Bridge the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective

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## 1. Introduction

Plan International, Inc. is an independent development and humanitarian organisation founded in 1937 that advances children’s rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, our supporters and partners.

To fulfil the promise of the 2030 Global Goals, Plan International’s five-year Global Strategy is designed to deliver significant change for girls and boys, putting a special emphasis on gender equality. Our ambition is to work beside girls, and take action together so 100 million girls learn, lead, decide and thrive.

Plan International welcomes the call for input published by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for a report on ways to bridge the gender divide from a human rights perspective, pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.

## 2. The gender digital divide

As an organisation that strives to advance children’s rights and equality for girls, Plan International is concerned about the impact of the gender digital divide on girls, both in terms of access to digital technology, and access to future employment and economic opportunities.

Digital technologies have a strong potential to empower girls and women economically and socially.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet girls and women are, on average, 14% less likely than men to own a mobile phone than men worldwide. When girls and women do own mobile phones, they are less likely to use mobile data, social media apps or SMS services compared to men.[[2]](#footnote-2) There is also a stark disparity in access to the Internet. In 2016, the Internet gender gap was 12% worldwide, and 31% in least developed countries.[[3]](#footnote-3) This gender gap in access to digital technology limits the ability of girls and women to benefit from many innovations of the digital economy, such as digital payments and mobile money. Girls also feel safer and more connected when they have a mobile phone, and they use mobile phones to save time and money and access education opportunities.

There is also a significant gender divide in terms of career and academic aspirations related to information and communication technologies (ICTs). In a 2016 survey, 56% of girls agreed with the statement that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects “have the image of being more for boys” than girls.[[4]](#footnote-4) In OECD countries, only 5% of girls expect a career in computing or engineering, while 18% of boys expect a career in these fields.[[5]](#footnote-5) These expectations are reflected in the workforce: a 2010 ILO study found that women working in the ICT sector tend to hold jobs at the bottom of the supply chain, such as in administrative and clerical roles, rather than the more lucrative managerial or technical roles.[[6]](#footnote-6) Another study of global trends in the ICT sector found that, on average, women account for 30% of operations technicians, but only 15% of managers and 11% of strategy and planning professionals.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## 3. The reasons behind the gender digital divide

**3.1 Literacy gap**

Girls and women lag behind boys and men and in both traditional and digital literacy. Nearly two thirds of the world’s 781 million illiterate adults are women,[[8]](#footnote-8) and men outscore women in “digital fluency” in almost all countries.[[9]](#footnote-9) This, in turn, makes it more difficult for girls and women to learn digital skills and capitalise on the potential of basic technology, such as mobile phones and SMS-based services. Lower digital literacy also makes girls and women more susceptible to risks associated with using technology and going online, such as unnecessary and high user fees, signing up for services they do not need, or inadvertently sharing too much private information about themselves.

Many services and tools exist that can make digital tools and technologies more approachable for people with low or no literacy skills, but there is further work required to make these tools more widely accessible. Therefore, bridging the traditional literacy gap as well as the digital literacy gap must be a priority issue as a component of broader efforts to ensure girls and women benefit from the digital revolution to an equal extent.

**3.2 Harmful gender stereotypes and lack of role models**

As outlined at section 2 above, one manifestation of the gender digital divide is the differing expectations girls and boys hold regarding potential careers in the ICT sector. This is of particular concern, given that women working in ICT earn almost 9% more than women in similar positions in the non-ICT service sectors.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Research shows that, along with persistent stereotypes, “lack of support from role models” discourages girls from pursuing ICT studies after secondary education.[[11]](#footnote-11) There is, therefore, a risk that the present gender imbalance in the ICT workforce will lead to a continuation of the gender digital divide. For this reason, it is crucial to enlist female mentors and teachers for computer classes and other technology-related initiatives, and to take concrete action to break down stereotypes and harmful norms that prevent women and girls from learning vital digital skills and pursuing careers in the field of ICT.

**2.3 Cultural norms and attitudes**

Attitudes that place less value on the well-being, education and independence of girls than boys are an additional factor behind the gender digital divide. In households with only one phone it is common for the phone to be owned and controlled by male family members, limiting girls’ ability to develop their technical literacy.[[12]](#footnote-12) Available research suggests that when a family buys a computer, it is often intended for the boy rather than the girl child, because parents can better envisage the potential for a boy to enter a future career in the ICT sector.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**2.4 Safety concerns**

Safety issues can also be a barrier preventing girls and women from accessing digital technology. According to Intel’s 2013 Women and the Web report, 25% of non-internet users between the ages of 14 and 17 reported that their families opposed them being online because they saw it as a safety risk.[[14]](#footnote-14) The same study found that, in parts of India, girls are often discouraged from accessing Internet cafes due to a perception that such places are “not safe” and “attract unsavoury types”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

These fears are not unwarranted. The internet is a hostile place for females, and sexism and harassment is commonplace and often difficult to control or prevent. This behaviour also aims to silence women and girls online and force them out of online spaces, further limiting their ability to effectively take advantage of the Internet and digital tools.

Research by Plan International illustrates the unique risks that girls face online. A 2016 study by Plan International Australia and Our Watch, “Don’t Send me That Pic”, found that seven out of ten Australian girls aged 15-19 believe online harassment and bullying is endemic, and 51% of girls believe that girls are pressured into taking explicit photographs of themselves and sharing them. The study recommended that schools address and prevent cyberbullying through a systematic “whole school approach” supported by professional learning for staff, curriculum learning for students and education sessions for families, coupled with quality school policies and a positive school culture that encourages reporting of bullying.[[16]](#footnote-16) A 2016 study by Plan International UK, “The State of Girls in the UK” similarly found that “girls are clear about the immense pressures to meet certain standards [in digital communication] and the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying... [and] too frequently, measures designed to protect girls are ineffective or even have negative consequences”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

## 3. Human Rights implications of the gender digital divide for women and girls

**3.1 Impact of new technologies on the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective**

Emerging technologies such as the Internet of Things, Virtual Reality, 3D printing and Artificial Intelligence hold a great deal of promise. However unless effort is made to close the gender digital divide, there is a real risk that the barriers girls and women face will be replicated with regard to these technologies. Rather than pushing for gender equality for device or intervention, change must be holistic and sustainable and address the broader issue of gender discrimination and gender stereotypes throughout women’s and girls’ lives.

**3.2 Protecting women’s and girls’ human rights offline and online**

As affirmed in Human Rights Council’s Resolution 32/13 on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online. Online spaces pose particular challenges to girls and women in terms of security, harassment and abuse. Failure to address these issues constitutes a failure to protect the rights of women and girls enshrined in international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## 4. Possible solutions for bridging the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective

**4.1 Plan International’s programming**

At Plan International, we have recognised the role that digital technology can play in empowering girls and women and overcoming the challenges of limited mobility. For example, in India, Plan International has partnered with Ericsson to establish 15 Digital Learning Centres for young women aged 15-25 in urban Delhi. The Digital Learning Centres use technology solutions to provide crucial ICT skills, as well as leadership and life skill education, to young women within their own communities. Since launching in 2015, the centres have provided classes to over 4,800 girls, and over 25,600 parents and community members have been sensitised on the importance of girls’ education.[[18]](#footnote-18)

When used effectively, digital technologies can also amplify the political voice of girls and women and promote their participation in political and governance processes. In Sri Lanka, Plan International has partnered with two local civil society organisations – the Moneragala District Women’s Federation and the Dry Zone Development Institute – on the European Commission-funded project “Empowering Women Through E-Governance”. This three-year project, which commenced in 2015, connects women from rural communities in Sri Lanka to community-based groups, where they receive ICT skills training, and advice on how to use these skills for human rights advocacy and government interaction.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**4.2 Additional solutions to bridge the gender digital divide**

As efforts to bridge the digital gender divide continue, it is important not to make assumptions about what girls and women need and want from technology. Instead, any work in this area must be guided by the voices of girls and women themselves. It is imperative to ensure that women have a voice in international forums where Internet governance and online safety and security are addressed, and that the influence of girls is visible in the field of technology.

Possible solutions for bridging the gender digital divide, in addition to those outlined above, include:

* The first step towards improving women’s and girls’ access to and use of technologies and digital spaces is to make them more relevant and safer for women and girls. To that end, governments should mainstream ICT and digital technology education in national curricula, and actively support and promote girls’ participation in these subjects, to ensure girls have equal access to opportunities in the workplaces of the future.
* To promote the safety of girls’ and women in online spaces, a set of global guidelines should be developed for zero tolerance towards gender-based harassment, cyber bullying, abuse and violence online. These guidelines would be open for endorsement by digital technology companies and organisations in the broader ICT sector.

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2. GSMA Connected Women, *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low and middle-income countries* (London: GSMA, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. International Telecommunication Union, “ICT Facts and Figures 2016,” (International Telecommunication Union, 2016). Accessed at: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2016.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Girlguiding, *What girls say about… digital technology* (London: Girlguiding, 2016), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, “What kind of careers do boys and girls expect for themselves?,” *PISA in Focus*, 14 (2012), 1. Accessed at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/49829595.pdf  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. International Labor Organization, *Work in the New Economy* (International Labor Organization, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nidhi Tandon, *A Bright Future in ICT Opportunities for a New Generation of Women* (International Telecommunications Union, 2012), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. United Nations, *The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics* (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2015), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Julie Sweet, “Access to Digital Technology Accelerates Global Gender Equality,” *Harvard Business Review* (May 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. European Commission, *Women active in the ICT sector*, (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content & Technology, 2013), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Agueda Gras-Velazquez, Alexa Joyce and Maïté Debry, *Women and ICT: why are girls and women still not attracted to ICT studies and careers?* (Brussels: European Schoolnet, 2009), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. GSMA Connected Women, *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low and middle-income countries,* 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Intel Corporation, *Women and the web: Bridging the Internet gap and creating new global opportunities in low and middle-income countries* (California: Intel Corporation, 2013), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Plan International Australia and Our Watch, “*Don’t send me that pic”: Australian Young Women and girls report online abuse and harassment are endemic* (Melbourne: Plan International Australia, 2016), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lucy Russell et al., *The State of Girls’ Rights in the UK 2016* (London: Plan International UK, 2016, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Digital Learning Centres”, Plan International India. Accessed at: https://www.planindia.org/digital-learning-centres [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Empowering Women through E-Governance in Sri Lanka”, Plan International. Accessed at: https://plan-international.org/empowering-women-through-e-governance-sri-lanka [↑](#footnote-ref-19)