



Ending the Gender Digital Divide in Myanmar

SUMMARY OF A PROBLEM-BASED POLITICAL ECONOMY ASSESSMENT

Ensuring that women and girls engage in the digital world is fundamental to Myanmar's democratic and economic growth. Yet women are 28% less likely than men to own a mobile phone, the primary means of internet access in the country, and experience related disparities in digital skills and use. To better understand this gap, we conducted a first-of-its-kind political economy analysis of Myanmar's gender digital divide. The full report, summarized here, offers a nuanced view of who is excluded and how, with tailored, practical recommendations to narrow the divide.

Globally, 3.9 billion people—disproportionately women—lack internet access

There is a direct correlation between systemic uptake of information and communication technologies (ICTs¹) and GDP, and the United Nations and other institutions have clearly articulated a link between ICTs and all seventeen of the UN Sustainable Development goals. While ICTs in general and internet access in particular are not a panacea, they are a critical component of sustainable and equitable economic and social development. Thus, it is cause for concern that 3.9 billion people worldwide lack access to the internet, the keystone of the ICT ecosystem.² As ICTs increasingly mediate both participation in and benefits of development processes, those who lack ICT access, skills, and benefits—disproportionately those who are female, rural, low income, illiterate, or elderly—risk increased marginalization.³

Myanmar's Political & Technological Revolution

Myanmar is undergoing a technological revolution concurrent with systemic political and economic change. As the country transitions to a democratic, market-based economy, there has been a great deal of optimism about the potential for ICTs to create more jobs, improve education and support other reforms in Myanmar.

Yet the nearly unprecedented pace of adoption of mobile ICT devices is uneven across gender, ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic lines. The differences in ICT access, skills and benefits experienced by men and women are known as the gender digital divide.

“4G mobile telephone services are being rolled out across [Myanmar] at a pace unmatched in the rest of the world. This phenomenon alone could contribute more to a successful transition than any other single policy reform.”

—Lex Rieffel, “Aung San Suu Kyi's New Government,”
Brookings Institution,
March 2016

¹ ICTs consist of hardware, software, networks, and media for collection, storage, processing, transmission, and presentation of information (voice, data, text, images). See World Bank Group, ICTs and MDGs: A World Bank Group Perspective, December 2003.

² ITU, *ICT Facts and Figures 2016* (Geneva: ITU, 2016).

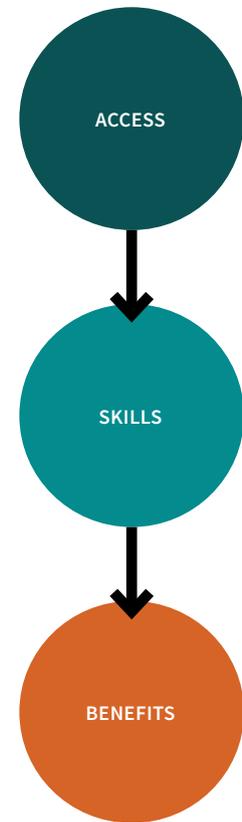
³ McKinsey & Company, “Offline and Falling Behind: Barriers to Internet Adoption,” September 2014.

What does this sea change in interconnectedness mean for Myanmar’s women and girls, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups?

To address this question, IREX conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) through a gender lens. The research reveals how **gender-based power dynamics, roles, and expectations** affect ICT ownership, usage, and benefits. It also reveals **institutional incentives** (or the lack thereof) to close the gender digital divide which inform the practical recommendations.



THE THREE COMPONENTS OF THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE



Key Findings

In Myanmar, the gender digital divide is systemic, skills are not keeping pace with access, and local actors are key.

- 1 The gender digital divide in Myanmar is systemic. It is detrimental to women’s and girls’ ability to participate in and benefit from development processes, and a brake on Myanmar’s ability to prosper.
- 2 Gender is not the biggest challenge related to accessing ICTs. Two issues are more problematic for women and girls:
 - a. Men and boys often have more control over ICT devices and more opportunities to acquire ICT skills.
 - b. Women and girls often feel that ICTs and digital content are not relevant enough to justify the time and expense.
- 3 There are not enough local actors - whether government agencies or nonstate institutions - championing digital inclusion. Stakeholders often are not aware of how the gender digital divide impedes development.
- 4 More stakeholders have incentives to integrate ICTs into their work than to make gender equality a priority.

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The ICT Sector Working Group should sponsor translation into Burmese of the World Bank’s *Checklist for the Planning, Design and Implementation of an ICT Project Incorporating Gender Issues* and distribute copies to all ministerial ICT focal points.

Recommendations

Address the priorities of women and girls—especially digital safety—and map interventions to skill levels.

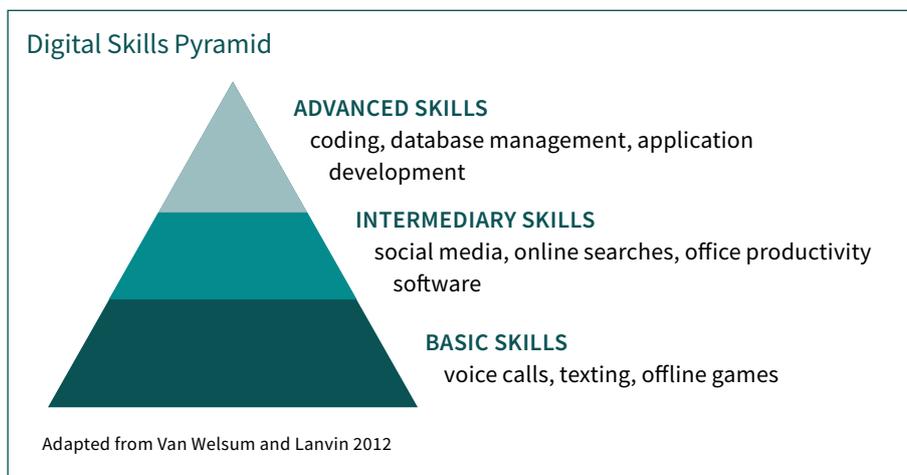
1. Accommodate the needs and priorities of women and girls when developing initiatives to increase access to ICTs and the internet

Although it is often difficult to discern existing incentive structures for key stakeholders in Myanmar, efforts to close the gender digital divide will be successful to the extent that they can demonstrate how closing the gap contributes to progress, peace and prosperity.

Prioritize equitable access in ongoing infrastructure investments:
 The ICT Sector Working Group should serve as a **focal point** to develop high-level government capacity to ensure equitable access for all, most urgently to champion the expansion of policy language in the draft **Universal Service Fund (USF)** strategy and draft **ICT Master Plan 2016–2020** to reflect the needs of vulnerable *groups* as well as underserved geographies and market segments. The Working Group should host non-ICT-sector digital divide allies to leverage parallel initiatives that also include digital access for vulnerable groups.

Leverage political momentum from the peace process:
 Stakeholders must underscore the gender digital divide’s **relevance** to the administration’s most pressing problem—achieving lasting peace. Specifically, INGO and CSO advocates should provide evidence-based case studies of the **peace dividends** of expanded ICT access to peace process participants. For example, female-headed households in isolated, conflict-affected areas can more safely and profitably run home-based businesses using ICTs to coordinate with suppliers or clients. Such benefits present win-win negotiating points where they align local socioeconomic needs with government and private-sector drivers of “last mile” investments for universal coverage.

2. Educators and employers must take into account the different challenges women and girls face at each level of the digital skills pyramid



⁴ For example, see *10 Steps to Helping Communities Create Early Grade Reading Materials with Bloom*, software used by public librarians in the Philippines to co-create more than a thousand new texts in local languages.



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 INGOs and coalitions like the Myanmar Education Consortium should pilot low-cost education tools like open-source e-book software to enable educators and activists to create easily replicable, locally relevant digital educational materials in minority languages.⁴

Gender-based differences in individual choices, institutional rules, and occupational norms strongly influence the acquisition of digital skills in Myanmar. Digital skills are the bridge from passive access to meaningful usage of ICTs that maximizes impact.



Embed digital literacy into universal education (bottom of the pyramid):

Donors and the government should fully fund *already planned* **formal and informal education** initiatives to integrate ICTs, as articulated in the National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021 and the Public Library Master Plan 2017–2022.



Catalyze the potential of early adopters to change norms (middle of the pyramid):

To most effectively expand the skills of early adopters and maximize their influence, stakeholders should tap into government and donor support for TVET programs and incorporate digital skills in vocational, occupational, and professional training. Focusing on female-dominated occupations that have a high degree of contact with rural and vulnerable populations in trusted venues, such as **educators, librarians, and health workers**, will optimize the downstream impact.



Support innovation and ICT jobs (top of the pyramid):

Norms around acceptable employment and women's household roles significantly limit women's acquisition of advanced digital skills that translate into ICT-sector employment. To establish a virtuous cycle of better supply and increased demand, private-sector ICT firms should diversify their talent pools by actively recruiting female staff for technical rather than administrative positions. Profit motives and an industry focus on user-centered design combine to make the private sector a champion of this important component of the gender digital divide.

3. Women are more likely to use ICTs if they perceive benefits in doing so

Many women lack incentives to upgrade their ICT usage and skills as the content they find most relevant is not widely available in digital formats, especially for ethnic minorities. For others, disincentives connected to safety outweigh potential benefits.



Align more digital content with women's needs:

In Myanmar, women are more likely than men to cite health care, education, sanitation, and microfinance as pressing issues. Technical assistance should support e-government services in areas women prioritize. Private ICT firms, CSOs, and INGOs should work together to expand the ecosystem for digital services in health, education, and agriculture to help those most affected by the digital divide.



Address women's digital safety and security concerns:

The pending cybersecurity bill is an important leverage point to address women's digital safety concerns. CSOs that focus on women's rights, legal issues, media, and tech should advocate for punitive consequences for violations of privacy and online gender-based harassment. Implementation of any cybersecurity rules will be critical, and all formal and informal digital skills training must include essentials of online safety that cover both rights and responsibilities.



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Government and INGO courses can adapt existing open-source digital literacy curricula into TVET materials to train female professionals. This can create role models and organically transfer digital skills through existing public services.⁵

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Private-sector CSR initiatives should support CSO-led inclusive information campaigns to raise public awareness of basic digital safety and security best practices. They should use universities, schools, libraries, mobile service providers' retail outlets, cyber cafes, telecenters, tea shops, police stations, banks, post offices, health centers, and other public venues serving diverse clientele.

⁵ For example, see the *mobile-first information literacy curriculum* developed by the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington, tested in Myanmar in 2015, and available in Myanmar language.