GIRLS' DIGITAL INCLUSION DESIGN AND DELIVERY: INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

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2021

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Suggested citation:
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all people who supported this project and/or took the time to share their experiences of girls' digital inclusion projects facilitation and management.

2021
In 2020, we began our study exploring the landscape of girls’ digital inclusion. We were keen to talk to those directly involved in gender digital inclusion programs design and their facilitation. We aimed to learn about the ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ in the context of girls’ digital inclusion program delivery and their evaluation.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR MEANINGFUL DIGITAL INCLUSION PRACTICES WHEN WORKING WITH GIRLS AND WOMEN?

This question was central to our conversations with gender digital inclusion experts (e.g., programs coordinators, researchers, community educators). These in-depth interviews provided us with unique insights into some of the challenges and opportunities related to the efforts to bridge the gender digital divide. The aim of this report is to share our findings of the first stage of “Girls' Digital Inclusion: the narrative of evaluation” and to provide a roadmap for girls’ digital inclusion programme’s design and delivery.
GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

is broadly defined as inequalities in girls' and women's access to, use of, and benefits from digital technologies due to the economic, social, and cultural obstacles.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

is a strategy to ensure that all people have equal opportunities and appropriate skills to access and benefit from digital technologies.

GIRLS DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAMMES

organised efforts that aim to address a wider range of problems related to girls' (including girls—children and girls—adolescents) intersectional needs to access and effectively utilize ICTs within and between countries, regions, sectors, and socioeconomic groups.
The Gender Tech project explores the gendered dimensions of the digital age in different societies and seeks new impactful ways to use data, theory and practice to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The broad research agenda of the project is to understand how the use of ICTs can be leveraged to tackle urgent gender problems such as gender digital divide and girls’ digital inclusion; as well as institutionalized forms of gender discrimination such as unequal educational opportunities, wage and leadership gaps. In addition, identifying how women and girls, in general, can improve their access to, effective use of and creative capacities with ICTs for self and community empowerment.

The Gender Tech project also explores the intersection of gender and technology within specific marginalized populations, such as migrants or rural women in low-income countries with a view to supporting their progress towards an enhanced quality of life. Finally, all research at the institute seeks to mainstream gender into its activities, to work towards gender justice, gender equality and women’s empowerment.
GIRLS' DIGITAL INCLUSION: WHY IT MATTERS

Despite progress in gender equality and women's empowerment, women's access to, use of, and benefits from digital technologies are limited due to economic, social, and cultural obstacles. To date, there is limited research on the digital inequalities among girls and children under the age of 18 [1].

The available data showcases some examples of the gender digital divide among children. For example, a girl growing up in Africa is 23% less likely to be online than her male counterparts. Young women in South Asia are 27% less likely to own a mobile phone [2]. Girls have significantly less access to online information and media in Nepal, India, Afghanistan and Timor-Leste [1].

Girls' meaningful digital inclusion is key to ensuring equal social, economic and cultural participation. Equal digital participation is also central to the global efforts to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The importance of girls and women’s proactive and meaningful digital inclusion is key in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In many developing countries, social distancing coupled with a lack of computer access can mean prolonged gaps in education. In addition, limited access to online information could also have a significant impact on everyday decision-making and, consequently, the futures of girls. While many tech-based tools and apps have offered temporary relief to COVID-19 restrictions, they have also exacerbated the existing digital divides. The long-term impact of COVID-19 might lead to devastating consequences when it comes to girls’ individual self-determination, agency as well as the wider problem of gender inequality.

"WITH SCHOOL, WORK, COMMERCE AND DAILY LIFE MOVING ONLINE DUE TO #COVID19, WE MUST QUICKLY FIND WAYS TO MAKE SURE GIRLS AND WOMEN AREN'T LEFT BEHIND"

Doreen Bogdan-Martin,
Director of ITU’s Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT)
During the last decade, there has been an increasing interest in non-formal educational programmes to address the gender digital divide. Non-formal education initiatives, broadly defined as additions, alternatives and/or complements to formal education, have provided young girls with opportunities to explore ICT related skills. Examples of girls’ digital inclusion programmes might vary from teaching girls how to access the internet to more advanced coding or robotics workshops.

Design and delivery of effective digital inclusions programmes for girls and women—any organised efforts which aim to empower women to use, gain access to, or learn about digital technologies (e.g. digital skills educational workshops, coding clubs)—are crucial in the efforts to bridge the global gender digital divide and to create a more fair, inclusive and sustainable digital world.
In 2020, we talked to 19 gender digital inclusion experts (e.g., programs coordinators, researchers) who had the experience of managing or/and facilitating girls’ digital inclusion programmes across different geographical regions (Fig. 1). The length of experience of working in the digital inclusion field varied among participants (Fig. 2).

This report is based on our conversations with gender digital inclusion experts. The following key questions informed our conversations: (1) What works and what does not work in girls' digital inclusion programme design and delivery? (2) What are some of the things that work 'in theory, but are difficult in girls' digital inclusion practice? (3) What are some of the dos and don’ts when it comes to girls' digital inclusion programmes design and delivery?

These in-depth interviews provided us with insights into the challenges and opportunities to bridge the gender digital divide. We conducted conceptual research to analyze and categorize the answers of participants, which comes in the next section.

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**Fig. 1 Gender digital inclusions’ work geographical coverage among interview participants**

**Fig. 2 Years of experience of gender digital inclusions’ projects facilitation and/or management geographical coverage among interview participants**
GIRLS' DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAMMING: INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN PROGRAMMES' DONORS AND FACILITATORS

TOXIC OPTIMISM AND UNREALISTIC IMPACT ASSUMPTIONS

INTERSECTIONALITY AND RESPONSIVENESS

GIRLS' LEARNING NETWORKS AND LOCAL POWER DYNAMICS
MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN PROGRAMMES' DONORS AND FACILITATORS

Our analysis revealed some tensions in the girls' digital inclusion sectors. Many experts talked about the lack of meaningful interactions between programmes' donors and those who run girls' digital inclusion programmes on the ground. Examples include donors' limited (or lack thereof) consideration of issues 'on the ground' such as local power dynamics, cultural aspects, and barriers to participation. Some experts also suggested that there is a problem of quantity over quality when it comes to programmes' design.

To address this problem, it was suggested that donors consider a participatory and responsive approach to programmes' design, delivery, and evaluation. Meaningful and informed participation of different stakeholders might lead to a better understanding of girls' digital inclusion realities. Participation should also serve programmes' facilitators as a way to ensure that their needs and requirements are met.

There is a need for a more meaningful dialogue between donors and facilitators. This is to better understand if/how programmes can be managed in a responsive and flexible manner. The dialogue should also serve as a way to keep up-to-date with girls' continually changing needs, fears, and aspirations.

You can’t mass market to solve the skills shortage (and girls’ digital exclusion)

- Linda Kamau from AkiraChix

Rather than only focusing on large scale investments and the broad understanding of a digital literacy gap, we need to focus on the quality of the programming and its local impact

- Dr Ingrid Brudvig
TOXIC OPTIMISM AND UNREALISTIC IMPACT ASSUMPTIONS

The existing narratives on the gender digital inclusion agenda are often viewed as overly aspirational, unrealistic – and sometimes even oppressive. For example, the narratives on "bridging the global gender digital divide", "breaking into tech", "becoming a tech role model" were described as overly ambitious/ grand and therefore problematic. While sharing gender digital inclusion success stories is important, it is equally crucial to openly talk about and share programs’ learning and failures.

However, nearly all experts believed that most programmes are required to primarily report evidence of positive impact in their evaluation reports. In addition, it was argued that many programs are primarily designed, delivered, and evaluated by pre-established and externally-govern criteria.

When asked about who owns or benefits from programs evaluation, one said, “anyone but the girls”. It was recommended, that all girls’ digital inclusion stakeholders (e.g., funders, policymakers) should consider these issues when designing and evaluating future programs.

Putting girls under pressure to become ‘tech role models’ or telling them to ‘break into tech’ isn’t useful. We should allow girls and programmes to fail and to define their own [development] paths.

- Lisa (research participant)

Some people assume that girls and women should always be hungry for knowledge and grateful [ for digital inclusion programmes]. When things go wrong, they ask, "what’s wrong with these girls?"

- Dr Revi Sterling
INTERSECTIONALITY AND RESPONSIVENESS

Our experts emphasized the importance of using an intersectional lens throughout the project. This is to truly understand and respond to girls' realities and their changing life circumstances. It was suggested that digital inclusion programmes design and delivery should not be set in stone. Meaningful digital inclusion, digital skills, and digital technologies are continually evolving. Girls' lives (and their digital inclusion) might be affected by issues related to their gender and other inequalities/oppressions (e.g., sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, indigeneity, immigration status, disability).

We recommend that any digital inclusion programme for girls should be informed by an intersectional analysis. The process should involve ongoing analysis of participants' economic, cultural, and digital contexts, including digital access, usage, ownership, behaviours, and barriers.

Any intersectional analysis should not be viewed as a one-off exercise, but a dynamic and responsive learning process that takes place through the program cycle (e.g. design, implementation, and evaluation) and be responsive to any unexpected changes in girls’ realities.

Digital inclusion programmes should not only be designed by people in charge who say, "this is what digital inclusion means, this is what needs to be delivered, and here is how we do it". There needs to be a discussion with the people you're focusing on.

- Anne (research participant)
Our experts emphasised that gender digital inclusion is not a power neutral process. The meaning and consequences of being digitally included will differ according to socio-political and cultural contexts. While the overall goal is to strive towards equitable digital inclusion for all genders, it is important to achieve this in an inclusive and sustainable way.

Girls’ digital inclusion programs should aim to work alongside the community and not against it. For example, some experts reported that parents, educators or local leaders might be sceptical about girls gaining online access. It is essential to consider such concerns and find ways to approach them in a culturally appropriate and mindful manner. To achieve this, our experts recommend mapping out girls’ learning networks and the power dynamics they operate in. Meaningful community engagement is therefore recommended to take place at all stages of the project.

It is crucial to critically examine and understand how local power dynamics and other intersectional considerations might affect girls’ access to digital technologies.

Dr Ronda Železný-Green
What works and what does not work in girls' digital inclusion programme design and delivery? This was the central question to our 19 in-depth interviews with girls' and gender digital inclusion experts.

Our analysis indicates that there are differences between the way girls' digital inclusion programmes are meant to operate (e.g. programmes design and impact criteria designed by funders) and the way these operation criteria are met on the ground. The experts indicated that programmes' design and their impact should not be seen as set in stone - designed and governed externally. It is crucial to approach girls' digital inclusion processes as highly contextual, evolving, and affected by intersectional factors. In other words, these programmes should not only be driven by what is already known about girls' digital inclusion but serve as a mechanism to inform its future.

Based on our analysis, we propose the following areas of consideration to improve girls' digital inclusion design and facilitation:

1. Meaningful dialogue and collaboration between programmes' donors and facilitators
2. Toxic optimism and unrealistic impact assumptions
3. Intersectionality and responsiveness
4. Girls' learning networks and local power dynamics

The experiences and voices of girls' and gender digital inclusion practitioners are underresearched. To improve future girls' and gender digital inclusion programming, it is crucial to listen to and understand the perspectives of those who directly work with the girls. Only through collaborative, critical, and genuine reflection, we can ensure that girls' digital inclusion programming responds to girls' needs now and in the years to come.