**[Bridging the gender digital divide](https://nation.com.pk/18-Nov-2020/bridging-the-gender-digital-divide%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. While men reportedly have a higher fatality rate, women and girls are especially hurt by the resulting economic and social fallout. Impacts on women and girls have worsened across the board. Women are losing their livelihoods faster because they are more exposed to hard-hit economic sectors. According to a new analysis commissioned by UN Women and UNDP, by 2021 around 435 million women and girls will be living on less than $1.90 a day—including 47 million pushed into poverty because of COVID-19.

Today, digital transformation provides new avenues for the economic empowerment of women and can contribute to greater gender equality. The internet, digital platforms, mobile phones and digital financial services offer ‘leapfrog’ opportunities for all and can help bridge the divide by giving women the possibility to earn additional income, increase their employment opportunities and access knowledge and general information. Sadly, the current status of Pakistani women amid this pandemic is that of overlapping layers of oppression and disadvantage, which have been exacerbated by women’s escalating digital divide and increasing ‘info-deficiency’.

Pakistan has the highest digital gender divide in the world. According to the GSMA’s ‘Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019’, Pakistan had the widest mobile ownership gender gap, as women were 37 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone due to economic inequality and patriarchal attitudes. Internet access in Pakistan stands at around 35 percent, with 78 million broadband and 76 million mobile internet (3/4G) connections.

There are a number of root causes of the digital gender divide, including hurdles to access, affordability, education—or lack thereof—and lack of technological literacy, as well as inherent biases and socio-cultural norms. This digital gap between the technological haves and have-nots widened even more during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a number of striking ways and had profound effects on the lives of Pakistani women. For example, less income, less education, and less infrastructure, meant less access to technology, which, in turn, meant less access to vital information regarding preventive measures, government announcements relating to lockdowns or cash-transfer initiatives, and public health campaigns that are now increasingly digitized.

Similarly, the digital divide can increasingly prevent women from accessing life-enhancing services for education, health, and financial inclusion in a world that has become virtual overnight—hence placing them in an information black hole. As education shifts to mostly online platforms, many Pakistani women are left out, which means they will also be more likely to be left out from the realm of formal employment as well. Consequently, they will stay trapped in informal, less paying—or even non-paying—labor, which will also keep them trapped in their less advantaged socio-economic status, while simultaneously adding to their obscurity, invisibility, and health risks. Moreover, this also means that they do not have the luxury to work from home, which is restricted to technologically savvy, economically privileged, urban-based, white-collar professionals. This, in turn, puts them at higher risk of illness, job instability, or both.

The impacts are not just economic. Gender digital divide can hamper women’s access to platforms that can help them attain justice against domestic violence or resources that can help them negative stereotypes and attitudinal biases.

The critical question, then is, what are the key steps to narrow the digital gender gap in Pakistan?

Beyond the public health crisis, COVID-19 has rapidly morphed into a full-fledged economic and social crisis. The effects will likely reverberate for years to come. As governments try to contain the damage, rampant inequalities have once again been revealed. Empowering women in the digital era is paramount and involves putting in place a number of interrelated and complementary policies to ‘build back better’.

First, the national digital strategy should focus on four dimensions, namely: extend networks and digital access (eg through satellite) to rural areas, promote access to and affordability and use of connected digital devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets, laptops), especially for low-income individuals, boost availability and promotion of e-banking and mobile money, especially to women and other disadvantaged categories and increase online safety.

Second, increase awareness of the digital gender divide, help address stereotypes, target existing gender biases in education curricula, encourage greater female enrolment in STEM studies and more generally, bridge the skills gender divide in the post-pandemic world.

Third, foster women’s entrepreneurship and engagement in innovation by designing incentive schemes for companies and organizations actively implementing gender-neutral policies linked to measurable targets.

Fourth, foster evidence-based gender-related actions by collecting gender-disaggregated data. Monitoring progress, benchmarking initiatives and identifying best practices and high-impact measures is critical for keeping the momentum behind efforts to close the digital gender divide.