Policy Brief

Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Uganda

Executive Summary

The gender digital divide refers to the difference in access and use of technology between men and women.

Although Uganda has a number of laws and policies that provide for gender equality, a focus on the digital gender divide is lacking. In this brief we argue for support of intermediaries which are organizations that interface with women and girls to overcome the barriers that limit their access to technology and full participation in the digital economy. Examples of intermediaries include innovation hubs, impact investors, small and medium businesses and digital skills providers.

The recommendations in this brief are based on the "Bridging the Digital Gender Divide to Stimulate African Digital Economies" project, an 18 month research project led by the University of Leicester in partnership with Makerere University Business School (MUBS), University of Ghana, Africa Technology Business Network (ATBN) and GENPOL. The Coalition for Digital Equality (CODE) network composed of stakeholders in the participating countries was established under the project. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and co-creation workshops with practitioners, civil society, policy makers and academicians. The results show that the digital gender gap may be attributed to the following factors: 1) Culture, which affects the pipeline of women digital leaders. 2) Gaps in gender lens investment. 3) Inadequate resources to run gender sensitive programs. 4) Bureaucracy in accessing and reporting to funders. 5) Perceptions by stakeholders that the female market is not viable. Given such a diverse set of constraints, we propose that policy interventions that seeks to support the intermediaries to reach beneficiaries and account to donors and government are necessary.

POLICY OPTIONS

- **Integration of gender analysis in evaluation of initiatives by intermediaries**

- **Support of multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries**

- **Recognition of intermediaries as a subsector of the gender ministry and develop regulations to harmonize activities**

- **Establishment of competitive grants targeting intermediaries that interface with female entrepreneurs**

- **Inclusion of gender equality targets across ICT policies to ensure they support women and girls in accessing and using the Internet.**

We make a number of policy suggestions including; the need to integrate gender analysis in the evaluation of initiatives by intermediaries; support for multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries through the establishment of specialized entities; the establishment of competitive grants targeting intermediaries; the recognition of intermediaries as a subsector of the gender ministry; and the inclusion of gender equality targets across ICT policies. We further dwell on the gender analysis approach to source evidence-based responses to the existing digital divide challenges.

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Statement of Issue

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number 5 calls for support of gender equality in Internet and broadband access, suggesting that digitally-based economic development can also foster women's empowerment. However, the gender digital divide remains pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, where contextual factors such as cultural beliefs, under-developed infrastructure and low earnings contribute to create a gender unequal access to technology.

This constrained access to technology and the Internet has socio-economic implications at the individual level and significant effects to the wider economy. It increases discrimination against women in the community, which in turn affects their access to entrepreneurial opportunities.

The research identifies a number of constraints that exacerbate this divide. They include; cultural issues, financing shortages, gaps in gender-lens investment, perceived lack of viability of a gendered market and funding bureaucracies. Evidently, interventions to remedy this situation need to adopt a multi-sectoral approach. We therefore argue that appropriate policy development can influence the bridging of the digital gender divide through promoting awareness, enabling affordable access to digital tools and facilitating cooperation among stakeholders.

To address this effort towards policy development the following question is asked: How should the government of Uganda support intermediaries in bridging the digital gender divide?

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Background

Technology is driving development the world over. While the developing world tends to lag behind, disparities based on gender exacerbate this problem (Mariscal et al., 2019). African women and girls are not benefitting as much as their male counterparts to the detriment of national development agendas.

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms (AfDEC) is a Pan-African initiative to promote human rights standards and principles of openness in internet policy formulation and implementation on the continent. This is based on affirmation that the Internet is a vital tool for the realisation of the right of all people to participate freely in the governance of their country, and that it must be accessible, available and affordable for all persons in Africa in order for them to fully benefit from its development potential as well as. The declaration also recognizes that women and girls are threatened with exclusion and marginalisation in relation to exercising their Internet and digital technologies rights.

According to the World Wide Web Foundation (2020) only 23% of Ugandans have access to the Internet. The study also revealed that while 28% of men had access only 19% of women had Internet access putting Uganda's disparity at 43% which is way higher than the region's average.

Despite this recognition, Uganda continues to face a number of challenges in realizing this. While there are a number of approaches through which this can be addressed, in this brief we single out the intermediaries that are active in engaging with the beneficiaries on the one hand and the government and its development partners on the other hand.

The intermediaries are involved in provision of capital, digital skills, research and advocacy.

This study identified five challenges facing the intermediaries:

1) Cultural elements influence women's use of modern technologies and their enrolment in Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) classes. Traditionally, technology is perceived as the domain of men and boys, and existing interventions hardly take into account these cultural practices.

2) The wide gender lens investment gap. Hardly any consideration is given to gender-based factors by investors, and there is limited investment in: women-owned or women-led enterprises, enterprises that promote workplace equity, and enterprises that offer products or services that substantially improve the lives of women and girls.

Another challenge is that promotion of work place equity in enterprises doesn't seem to attract investment. Relatedly, there is hardly any investment in enterprises that offer products or services that substantially improve the lives of women and girls.

3) Intermediaries lack resources to run gender sensitive programs.

4) The intermediaries were hobbled by bureaucratic procedures in accessing donor funds, especially in as far as reporting requirements are concerned.

5) Stakeholders do not view the female market as viable, which in turn limits the level of investment in female owned enterprises.

Given these challenges to bridging the gender digital divide we vouch for the broadening of policy beyond a focus on the women and girls to include the intermediaries.

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Existing policies

Uganda has two main policies relating to the digital gender divide; the Uganda Gender Policy 2007 and the National Information and Communication Technology Policy 2014.

The Uganda Gender policy seeks to guide all levels of planning, resource allocation and implementation of development programs with a gender perspective. On the other hand the National Information and Communication Technology Policy aims at transforming Ugandan society through enhancing the existing sub-sector policies in the areas of Telecommunications, Postal Services, Broadcasting, Information Technology and Information Management Services. Other relevant policies include; the National Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Policy 2009 and the National Development Plan 3 2020/21 – 2024/25.

The National Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Policy 2009 seeks to strengthen national capability to generate, transfer, and apply scientific knowledge, skills and technologies that ensure the sustainable utilization of natural resources for the realization of Uganda's development objectives. The National Development Plan 3 on the other hand seeks to increase household incomes and improve the quality of life of Ugandans through sustainable industrialization for inclusive growth, employment and sustainable wealth creation.

Despite this well-crafted policy framework, more needs to be done to increase women participation in the digital landscape. We argue in this brief that policies that target intermediaries will facilitate cooperation among intermediaries, enable access to resources and the disbursement of financial and knowledge resources to a greater number of beneficiaries.

Policy options

Policy will be very important in facilitating intermediaries to cooperate with other stakeholders to eliminate barriers to girls and women's full participation in the digital world. Policymakers therefore have a responsibility to adopt gender conscious policy measures. Here below we highlight five policy options:

- **Integration of gender analysis in the evaluation of initiatives by intermediaries**

- **Support of multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries**

- **Recognition of intermediaries as a subsector of the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development and develop regulations to harmonize their activities**

- **Establishment of competitive grants targeting intermediaries that interface with female entrepreneurs**

- **Inclusion of gender equality targets across ICT policies to ensure there is for support women and girls in accessing and using the Internet.**

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Policy option evaluation

Following the proposal of the above policy options, we provide a discussion of each policy option.

1. Integration of gender analysis in the evaluation of initiatives by intermediaries

The advantage of integrating gender analysis in investment evaluation is that it provides specific data on activities and resources of women and men, as well as the cultural underpinnings of these relationships. The approach makes it possible to generate data that is disaggregated by gender, which ensures that the realities of both men and women are reflected in national ICT data. This provides the basis for gender-inclusive policy and planning and, ultimately, enhances accuracy in planning.

Gender analysis helps us know who has access, who has control, who is likely to benefit from the new initiative, and who is likely to lose. It can also lead us to explore assumptions about issues such as the distribution of resources and the impact of culture and traditions.

The insights gleaned from such data will enable the implementation of awareness campaigns that tackle socio-cultural norms, biases and stereotypes.

However, the integration of gender analysis may encounter challenges as it requires a tremendous amount of resources and commitment to implement the results. The absence of skilled professionals and local expertise may seriously undermine efforts to undertake the analysis and for the policy makers to implement the findings.

2. Support of multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries

The advantage of supporting multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries helps to provide a versatile approach to a complex problem. This is achieved in part by the sharing of risks and the combination of resources to arrive at innovative solutions.

However, a number of challenges are likely to occur as a result of supporting multi-stakeholder cooperation among intermediaries and these include the challenge of accurately valuing the contributions of each partner. Another challenge is the hesitation to invest in the partnership process which would yield desirable outcomes.

3. Recognition of intermediaries as a subsector of the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development and develop regulations to harmonize their activities

Recognition of intermediaries and the regulation of activities in the sub-sector will enable the standardization of practices. This will in turn ensure safety and equity in bridging the gender digital divide through the monitoring by the regulatory authorities.

However, regulation may inadvertently erect barriers to innovation or the entrance of new competitors if norms are created that support only existing players and practices. Further to this, meeting regulatory requirements may consume a ssizeable amount of the resources available to the intermediaries.

4. Establishment of competitive grants targeting intermediaries that interface with female entrepreneurs

This will lower the cost of the capital of the intermediaries. The competitive grants will also open participating intermediaries to closer scrutiny by the grant giver (government), and enable pro-people activity.
Conditions for winning these grants may include the involvement of the diverse communities of interest.
Furthermore, competitive grants will enable intermediaries develop strong and refined ideas and bids, knowing that there is competition for a limited amount of resources. The grants will promote collaborations between related projects, and between intermediaries and the funder (through the grant application process). The winning grants ultimately will increase the prestige and credibility of the intermediaries and their products/services.

However, the establishment of such competitive grants may limit the competitiveness of the beneficiary firms as access to these resources may be relatively easier than what is available on the market. Further to this, small intermediaries may have to spend money to write grant proposals that they are not guaranteed to win, which ultimately increases their running costs.

5. Inclusion of gender equality targets across ICT policies to ensure there is for support women and girls in accessing and using the Internet

This will ensure consistency across the national policy frameworks and avoid duplication and multiple messaging regarding the government's position on gender equality. It will further address gender gaps in accessing government services and provide clear accountability structures to ensure targets are delivered. Subsequently, it will help prioritize investment in applications targeting women or those developed by women

However, the inclusion of gender equality targets across ICT policies requires continual assessment, as well as monitoring and evaluation to gauge the impact of policy measures on different groups in society.
These targets must also be accompanied by changes and the enforcement of a number of policies related to privacy and harassment.
Ultimately, the related costs of implementing such a policy are likely to be high.

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Recommendation

While the implementation of all the proposed options would be ideal, it is important to be cognizant of the attendant costs and possible implementation <u>challenges</u>. A phased approach is therefore proposed starting with the integration of gender analysis in evaluation of initiatives by intermediaries.

The gender analysis approach explores the interrelationships between social context and economic factors. It helps explain the benefits of development initiatives on women and men and provides contextual explanations for measures that may promote equality. It also evaluates how potential initiatives may affect division of labour across the genders. Gender analysis requires a participatory approach involving funders, implementers, individuals and organizations working in the community to advance gender equality. Through integration of gender analysis, additional gender data may be sourced as part of the due diligence process. The insights gleaned from such data will enable the implementation of awareness campaigns that tackle socio-cultural norms, biases and stereotypes. It will lead to the design of programs and projects that can build effective actions to promote gender equality. Consequently, gender analysis will lead to the increase in the amount of funding available for female entrepreneurs, create employment opportunities for women while supporting companies that hire women, particularly in leadership positions and it will help diversify products to have a recognizable impact on women.

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