



UNIVERSITY  
OF GHANA

# POLICY BRIEF: Bridging the Digital Gender Divide in Ghana

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In our world today, digital technologies are providing global opportunities for improving the overall well-being of persons. However, the inequities that plagued and sidelined women in offline social settings have persisted into online modes. In response to this, the Government of Ghana has instituted several policy initiatives aimed at addressing gender gaps both offline and online, but with limited success.

With a focus on the digital gender gap, evidence from our project funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) provides policy prescriptions that argue for the inclusion of non-state intermediaries, such as innovation hubs, impact investors, small and medium businesses, and digital skills initiatives in addressing this challenge. These actors represent a missing middle, which have the capacity to reach several beneficiaries. They potentially stand to be that bridge that connects women to the desired outcomes for which policy initiatives have been instituted by the Government of Ghana.

However, for this approach to work, the regulation of the intermediary space is necessary. This may involve the enactment of new policy guidelines or the amendment of existing ones. In addition, we recommend that programming is gender sensitive through regular competitive calls for programmatic proposals. Finally, incentives are needed from ICT-based small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) to develop gender sensitive applications suited to the specific needs of women and girls.

# BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF ISSUE

The proliferation of digital technologies has been one of the biggest social phenomena of this millennium. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2015), 3.2 billion people use the internet, and approximately 63% live in the developing world. The Broadband Commission (2013) notes that digital technologies have had a significant impact on poor communities by delivering development goals such as the improving employment opportunities, enhancing financial inclusion, improving agricultural methods, and better access to healthcare and skills development.

In the face of these benefits, however, 200 million fewer women compared to men utilize digital technologies (Broadband Commission, 2013). This phenomenon has been referred to as the digital gender divide. More formally, this notion is used to describe the disparities in the access and use of digital technologies between men and women in various forms (Norris, 2001). These forms include access, extent of use, technical skills, and social support in using these technologies.

Although recent evidence suggests that the digital gender gap has closed, it remains significant. The global data from multiple global agencies back the existence of the digital gender divide (Fatehkia et al., 2018). The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in 2017 estimates, for example, that in developing economies, 45% of men use the Internet relative to 37.5% of women in the same country. The situation is even dire for women in least developed countries, where male internet penetration is 21% relative to 14% for women in the same country.

In 2015, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA), the global body that represents telephony organizations, notes that 59% of women do not own a mobile phone, while 74% of men do. This translates to 80 million fewer women who own mobile phones compared to men globally.



Several reasons have been adduced for this gap in Ghana. Firstly, one of the significant precursors of the gap is the low overall infrastructure for digital technologies in Ghana. The low internet infrastructure has a negative correlation with the gender digital gaps. Generally, as penetration increases, more and more women will have access to digital technologies, and therefore, this will bridge the digital gap between men and women.

The second set of factors have been traditionally cited as engendering gender gaps between men and women (Hilbert, 2011). These factors include lower levels of literacy, lower employment opportunities, and lower income levels for women relative to men. Traditionally, the patriarchal system in Ghana which establishes male dominance and sets specific gender roles threatens opportunities for women's access to digital technologies. Women have been socialized to belief that Science Technology, Engineering and Math are the preserve of men.



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In a recent project on the digital gender divide in Ghana and Uganda funded by the UK Research and Innovation's Global Challenges Research Fund, the team established three main causes of the digital gender divide that validate some of the points discussed above. These points include cultural inhibitions, resource constraints, and perceived lack of market for women in the digital economy:

(1) The project findings reveal that cultural norms socialize women out of the science, technology, engineering, and maths-based courses and into the humanities.

(2) The innovation hubs and spaces that can bridge these cultural inhibitions are also found to be resource-constrained. Two main reasons that explain this point are the lack of available mentors that young girls can identify with, and the lack of a critical mass to organize gender-sensitive programmes for young girls.

(3) Finally, most ICT-based service providers perceive that they will struggle to serve a purely female market if not funded by development partners. The service providers argue that these digital products will not be sustainable post-development funding.



# EXISTING POLICIES

Five main policies inform the issue of the gender digital divide in Ghana, under the Government of Ghana (GoG). These are the National Gender Policy (2015), the National Broadband Policy and Implementation Strategy (2012), ICT in Education Policy (2008), National Telecommunications Policy (2005), and ICT for Accelerated Development (ICT4D) Policy (2003).

The National Gender Policy seeks to mainstream the issue of gender in Ghana's development efforts. The policy is crafted towards achieving the 1992 Constitutional mandate of ensuring equal access to national resources and opportunities by all citizens. The policy, more specifically, seeks to grant women and girls equal access to economic, social, and judicial resources of state. The National Broadband Policy and Implementation Strategy on the other hand seeks to guide the development of broadband networks across the country. The policy objectives are to ensure that internet connectivity through broadband networks reaches the majority of Ghanaians within the remit of population density, tax incentives, and subsidy programmes.

One of the major objectives of the GoG is to ensure that Ghanaians have access to high-quality internet that is affordable and accessible, and the National Telecommunications Policy provides the framework for the achievement of this objective. The ICT for Education policy also expresses the vision and mission statement of the Ministry of Education in utilizing ICT to develop a workforce for the local and international work environment. The ICT4D Policy represents the vision of the GoG in the Information Communications and Technological era, which sets out the road map for using ICT to achieve the development targets of the GoG.



# EXISTING POLICIES

## The Missing Middle

Notwithstanding these policy initiatives, none is specifically targeted at bridging the digital gender divide in Ghana that currently stands at 5%. Most of the policies encourage female empowerment but do not discuss how these are to be achieved.

One mechanism that gender policy advocates but is absent in telecommunications-based policies is the use of non-state actors in achieving gender objectives. In this policy brief, we argue that intermediaries (defined as non-state actors that provide capital, digital skills, advocacy, and research targeted at reducing the digital gender divide), represent a significant means that, when properly harnessed, can lead to bridging the digital gender divide in Ghana. These intermediaries include innovation hubs, impact investors, small and medium businesses, and digital skills initiatives.

Based on the stakeholder consultations and co-creation workshops we conducted, we found that these non-state actors have the capacity and competence to reach a greater number of beneficiaries than the current state bureaucracy will. Because the digital gender divide represents an institutional problem, we advocate that the Government of Ghana intervenes to empower intermediaries to address the digital gender divide in Ghana. In the following section, we present policy recommendations for Government of Ghana consideration.

## POLICY OPTIONS

### POLICY 1

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Regulation

### POLICY 2

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Competitive Government of Ghana  
Programmatic Calls

### POLICY 3

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Tax Incentives for ICT-Based Small  
and Medium Businesses (SMBs)

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## REGULATION

Regulating the intermediary landscape will significantly support intermediaries in achieving the goal of minimizing the gender digital divide. Currently, there is no clear policy framework that guides the operations of non-state intermediaries. Significant aspects of their operations fall outside the remit of the Companies Act of 2019 that guides operations of companies limited by shares or guarantee.

The Act only guides formation and legal framework but nothing more. The British Council and the Social Enterprise Ghana have sought to provide such support to these actors but have not received governmental policy backing.

This policy framing does not require a new policy document. Existing policy documents, such as the National Telecommunications Policy and/or the National Broadband Policy can be amended to capture the activities of these intermediaries. Such regulation will offer two main benefits:

1. A framework to guide impact investing in the technology landscape. Specifically, policies to encourage and support impact investments that support women's digital inclusion such as funding for women-owned businesses and products/services that are gender-inclusive.
2. A reporting mechanism for the government to track the progress made in periodically bridging the digital gender gap.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## COMPETITIVE GOVERNMENT OF GHANA PROGRAMMATIC CALLS

One major challenge that intermediaries face is the availability of resources to develop and implement gender-sensitive programmes. While most intermediaries acknowledge the presence of a digital gender divide and seek to engage in activities that minimize it, they are resource-constrained.

Consequently, in addition to regulating the sector, competitive Government of Ghana calls for proposals to support the implementation of such programmes that can help resolve this challenge and enable intermediaries to reach more women with digital skills initiatives and opportunities.

This approach ensures that resource constraints of the intermediaries are addressed while the Government of Ghana will have indirect control over the activities of these intermediaries. Ultimately, government policy directions are achieved.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## TAX INCENTIVES FOR ICT-BASED SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESSES (SMBS)

Most technology-based SMBs do not develop gender-sensitive applications that can aid education, economic, health, and the social needs of women. This is largely due to the fact these SMBs do not consider a gendered market as significant for their consideration.

To achieve impact investing in this direction, the Government of Ghana needs to design tax incentives in the form of tax rebates and deferred tax liabilities that will enable these SMBs to recover their R&D costs relative to their gendered products.

Failure to support these SMBs develop these female-specific ICT products will only perpetuate the existing divide.

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