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Bridging the digital gender divide

Julia Maria Angeli • last updated: Mar 08,2023

(Photo: Care Jordan)

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This International Women's Day, we are celebrating DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality. ICT and digital literacy are transforming the quality of life and social well-being, powering growth and development of individuals and communities. Over 90 percent of jobs worldwide already have a digital component, and most jobs will soon require sophisticated digital skills.

Technology, however, is not equal. The digital divide primarily affects those already disadvantaged segments of the population, with digital exclusion occurring due to gender, age, socioeconomic factors, place of residence (urban/rural), disability, and levels of literacy.

"I don't feel like I own the phone; honestly, my sisters call and ask why I don't answer their calls, but the truth is that I don't have time; I'm always busy, and the phone is always with my kids."

Sparked by the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, CARE Jordan has embarked on a digital transformation of its services. To ensure that we do not

exacerbate the digital divide, or the negative impacts that it can be associated with – such as access to services and personal safety – CARE Jordan conducted a gender and inclusion analysis in an effort to assess the different needs of women, men, youth, elderly, and people with disabilities and provide recommendations on how to implement gender responsive and inclusive digital programming. The analysis followed a mixed methods approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative sources of evidence and targeted vulnerable Jordanian and refugee households.

Mobile phone ownership, usage

Key findings on access, usage, and control include the following: Reflecting national trends, our quantitative data shows high rates of both ownership and access to mobile phones, as 95 percent of women said they own a mobile phone, versus 98 percent of men. Moreover, 93 percent of men and 88 percent of women stated that they use a mobile phone at least once a day.

However, our qualitative findings provide a more nuanced reality on the quality of access with most focus group discussion (FGD) participants – both male and female – agreeing that a woman's phone is distinct from the phones used by other members of the family. The mother's phone is given to the children who are studying or others, while men have priority over the control and usage of their mobile phones.

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"I don't feel like I own the phone; honestly, my sisters call and ask why I don't answer their calls, but the truth is that I don't have time; I'm always busy, and the phone is always with my kids," said a female FGD participant in Zarqa.

Digital dangers

Social and gender norms also play a key role in access and digital literacy. The majority of FGD respondents (from both sexes and different locations) stated that women's access to and ownership of mobile phones needs to be controlled and monitored for safety reasons, particularly if they are unmarried. This speaks to other global and national research which cites that digital technology poses as a danger to women, with online harassment by strangers and by people they know, including cyberdating and abuse by intimate partners, is a common occurrence. The Sisterhood is Global Institute states that cyber-violence and harassing remarks are a threat to almost 2.7 million female internet users in Jordan, including one million underaged girls.

"I'm the youngest among my sisters; none of them had

phones unless they were married. My older sister attends the same university as me, and she has her own mobile that my family can call us through," said another female FGD participant from Zarqa.

Critical awareness, ethical mobile engagement

However, controlling and monitoring access and usage results in exacerbating the digital divide and cyber-violence and exploitation. Preventing girls and young females from using technology and the internet is not a solution – equipping people with the critical awareness they need to engage with these tools is.

Boys and girls typically show equal digital competence in primary school, however, by secondary school a gap starts to form which is not necessarily related to skills but rather perceptions of self-efficacy.

This critical awareness needs to be complemented with ethical thinking which teaches youth to engage with content and other users safely, wisely, and responsibly. This formation needs to happen in schools and from an early age so that children and youth are better equipped for this digital age.

For a safer, more inclusive online world

The gender analysis also provided evidence around women being less likely to know how to operate a smartphone, navigate the internet, and use social media compared to men. Boys and girls typically show equal digital competence in primary school, however, by secondary school a gap starts to form which is not necessarily related to skills but rather perceptions of self-efficacy. Because of this factor, and others such as domestic responsibilities, lack of mentorship, expectations around educational achievements, and appropriate livelihood streams, young women grow up participating less in digital technology.

Digital skills need to be part of the Government of Jordan's economic recovery, and this must include the equitable inclusion of women and girls. CARE Jordan is a big advocate for behavior change interventions on restrictive gendered norms, which includes women and men of all generations. We need to work with schools, parents, and the tech industry to embrace this inherent bias in technology and work towards more inclusive behaviors. It is therefore important that women and girls occupy this space, which has been created by men, so that it can better reflect our needs, hopes, and wishes, as well as a safer online world.

Julia Maria Angeli is the Senior Gender and Program Design Manager for CARE International in Jordan.

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