Gender and the Digital Divide

EVENT SUMMARY

Online via Zoom
When: Thursday, March 26, 2020 | 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM

Speakers
Jennifer Johnson | Strategic Partnerships, Cell-Ed
Rebecca Rouse | Program Director, Financial Inclusion Program, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)
Revi Sterling, Ph.D. | Director, W-GDP WomenConnect Challenge, USAID

Event Description

Digital technology is revolutionizing the world by broadening access to information, services, networks and opportunities. Across developing countries, mobile is the primary way most people access the internet. For women, access to the internet is critical to reaching their full economic potential. However, in low to middle income countries, 300 million fewer women than men use mobile internet. The internet user gap is as high as 70% in some countries.

Advancing women's digital connectivity is key to promoting their empowerment in an increasingly digital world. Yet the persistent gender digital divide is reinforcing, and even exacerbating, existing socioeconomic gaps between men and women. While some studies show the gender gap decreasing, others show just the opposite. What is the true state of the gender digital divide? Can technology address the technology gap? In some cases, yes. This panel looked at how technology can be used to change restrictive gender norms, address literacy and digital literacy, and create new algorithms for sustainable gender equity.

This event featured a conversation about this divide, recent improvements, and where advancement is still needed.

This was the first event in our Series on Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.
Key Takeaways

1. Closing the Gender Digital Divide

   **Revi Sterling** (USAID) began the event by describing the gender digital divide as the lack of access to technology that women have in different communities around the world. Tech organizations and non-profits often take the approach of introducing technology and allowing for access to the internet as an important tool for education and poverty alleviation for numerous communities globally. Sterling stated that in certain communities and regions, women are still unable to access technology due to societal issues, gendered stereotypes, and cultural norms. Sterling drew attention to how digital development can be navigated within such communities, thus emphasizing the need for technologists to understand the underlying issues that the women in these communities face. According to Sterling, co-creating tech literacy or digital development programs with the women from the community is essential in closing the gender digital divide and making technology more accessible to women.

2. Barriers to Women’s Financial Inclusion

   **Rebecca Rouse** (Innovations for Poverty Action or IPA) introduced IPA’s project in the Dominican Republic, which focuses on developing a gender-differentiated credit scoring model. Building on the gender digital divide that Sterling talked about, Rouse introduced how this phenomenon affects women when applying for loans as technology and finance merge. Low-income women around the world often have an inadequate financial history due to factors such as informal jobs and pay, inability to prove income history, or inability to fill credit applications. IPA is therefore working to ensure that factors that lead to this gender-differentiated credit scoring can be taken into account through digital development. Rouse therefore stressed the need to design financial models in which the gendered biases — specific to the communities from which they stem — can be removed from the algorithm that supports credit scoring.

3. Using Technology to Educate

   **Jennifer Johnson** (Cell-Ed) presented how Cell-Ed was designed as educational programming that would be accessible to women. Cell-Ed operates through portable devices such as tablets, mobile phones and flip phones to provide lessons on topics such as financial literacy and maternal health through a system of text messages and call-backs. This makes lessons accessible, as it reduces some of the barriers to education that women face, namely travel and time. Johnson explained that lessons provided by Cell-Ed are customizable to the needs of the individual accessing them, and the trainers are often women from the same communities, ensuring linguistic and cultural familiarity for the individuals accessing the lessons. Johnson also emphasized the importance of adapting the lessons to issues relevant to women and gave an example of how Cell-Ed is developing lessons for women and children to access education that may have been halted due to COVID-19.