ACTIO INSIGHT

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FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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Keywords : Gender Digital Divide, Women's Economic Empowerment, Digital Inclusion, Infrastructure and Accessibility, Digital Literacy, Online Safety, Socioeconomic Development

As part of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 intended to guide UN Women towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the 2030 deadline, one key intervention UN Women seeks to do to realize women's economic empowerment is to promote financial and digital inclusion to close an overlooked issue in the broader discussion of gender inequality — the gender digital divide. [ii]

The digital divide refers to the difference between groups that enjoy access to modern digital technologies [iii] that are restricted. [iv] Such a gap sees women and girls at the short end of the stick. Despite the limited data available on the gender digital divide, and even less on girls under 18, what is available demonstrates a pattern of inaccessibility and quantifies the gap between digital adoption and use in women and girls compared to that of men and boys. [v] Comparatively, this gap is most pronounced in developing countries. [vi]

This has significant implications for social and economic development because digital technologies act as enablers in a world where the economy is digitalized at an unprecedented speed. A study conducted by International Finance Corporation (IFC) reveals that nearly 40% of respondents who received digital education informed improvements in economic opportunities and income. [vii] Girls and women, particularly those living in the developing world, as often omitted the same level of access to various modes of benefits and opportunities as their counterparts. In another study in 32 developing countries, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) calculated that closing the gender digital gap would give USD 524 billion in opportunities. [viii] Therefore, removing this barrier would uplift the socioeconomic status of women and girls and the economy in general.

The latest Indonesian Internet Providers Association (APJII) survey reports 220 million internet users in Indonesia, a significant increase from the 175 million users prior to the pandemic. [ix] The survey also says the internet penetration rate for women at 48% compared to men at 52%. [x] The digital gap is more pronounced in the economic realms. A study by The SMERU Research Institute found that only 60.5% of women in Medium, Small, and Micro Entrepreneurship (MSMEs) in Indonesia applied digitalization strategies during the pandemic compared to 63% of men-owned MSMEs. [xi] Although the number is not statistically significant, the study explained again that digitalization strategies that require more capital are dominated by men. This is shown by the percentage of women-owned MSMEs using specific websites to promote their business which is 14% compared to 23.4% of men, and the rate of increased connectivity during the pandemic, which is 43% compared to 49% of men. [xii] The SMERU study noted that the need for digitalization in women MSMEs has much to do with the lack of funding.

Apart from MSMEs, the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) field workforce is also still dominated by men. Looking at the data in 2018, only 12% of STEM graduates in Indonesia were women. [xiv] The data is concerning because it means the lack of formal STEM education would also mean the gap widening. It is shown in the data on women working professionally in the high-tech sector where only 14% of the total women workforce have a position as professionals or technicians, compared to 31% of men. [xv]

In bridging the gender digital divide, UNICEF informs three factors that must be addressed: access, digital literacy, and online safety. [xvi] Indonesia falls behind on all three accounts. One study reveals the lack of access to Indonesian women, particularly in rural areas, as a result of poor infrastructure. [xvii] Poor infrastructure brings less meaningful connectivity. Unlike being just connected to the internet, the A4AI described meaningful connectivity as the sufficient quality of internet connection enabling people to work, socialize, and participate in the online community. [xviii] This, in turn, disproportionately burdens women, as they tend to experience higher rates of poverty and are vastly underrepresented in top-income groups. [xix]

The same study reports Indonesian women as having poor digital literacy. This concerns their knowledge, skills, and abilities to operate digital technologies. It is linked to access, as digital literacy cannot be achieved without regular use and accessible and quality education. [xxxi] Lastly, online gender-based violence was the most reported at LBH Apik Jakarta from 1 November 2020 to 30 October 2021, with 489 cases. [xxii]
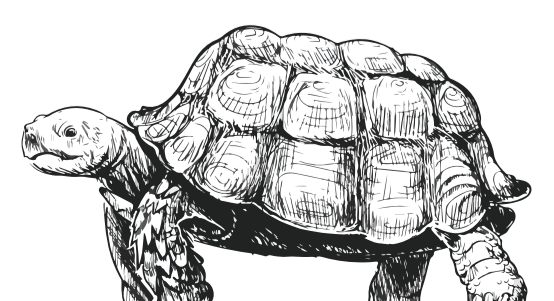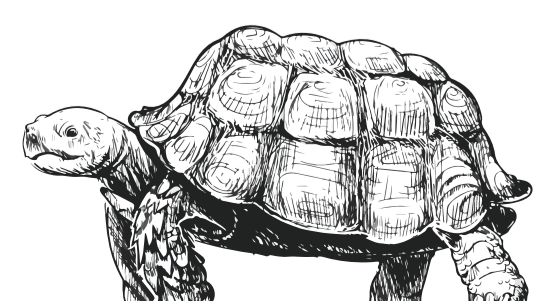
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Efforts to remove the barriers to digital technologies include but are not limited to investing in infrastructure, digital literacy education, and making online spaces free from harassment and discrimination, or any form of violence, towards women and girls.[xxiii] Gender-mainstreaming and consistent partnerships with various sectors by the government could provide better access for women to digital literacy.[xxiv]

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