APrIGF Macao 2015
Workshop Summary Report

Date: 1 July 2015
Time: 0900-1030

Workshop Title: Can Mobile Internet Bridge the Gender Digital Divide? Challenges and Opportunities for Stakeholders

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Gender Balance (approx. number of female vs. male participants): 13 females, 8 males

Moderators: Noelle de Guzman, Regional Programmes Coordinator, Internet Society
Panelists:
- Austin Menyasz, Policy Advisor for APAC, GSMA (private sector)
- Lisa Garcia, Gender and ICT Coordinator, FMA (civil society)
- Lih Shiun Goh, Policy Analyst, Google (private sector)
- Chat Ramilo, Deputy Executive Director, APC (civil society)

A brief summary of presentations (If any)

Bridging the Gender Gap: Mobile Access and Usage in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Research done by GSMA shows that mobile is growing rapidly in Asia, with mobile broadband connections up by 43% per year, and mobile penetration now at 42% across the region—much higher than the fixed line penetration rate of 8%. However, it also notes that there is a persisting gender gap in the usage of mobile technologies, due to factors such as: (a) social norms that discourage women’s access (b) security and harassment and; (c) service delivery issues and lack of technical literacy. As a way forward, it suggests including digital literacy skills in school curricula; fostering women-oriented, entrepreneurial ecosystems for mobile products and services; and enforcing targeted, subsidised programmes that help women gain access to mobile devices.

Women and Mobile Internet in the Philippines

The Philippines currently has a 113% mobile penetration rate, with 42% of subscribers availing of mobile broadband. More specific data on usage trends and patterns among women however is largely missing. Thus far, surveys and focus group discussions conducted by the Foundation for Media Alternatives in urban poor households found
that ICT devices tend to be held, used and owned primarily by men. FMA also found that even women who have mobile phones tend not to avail of mobile data due to its prohibitive cost. It concluded that women do find value in going online to communicate with friends and family, find jobs, access government services and in marketing their goods but the cost of connectivity and devices, as well as lack of digital skills, prevent women from accessing the Internet.

**A substantive summary and the key issues that were raised:**

Connecting women to the Internet has substantial economic and social benefits, not only for women themselves but for businesses, communities and countries more broadly.

However, women continue to face multiple barriers to going online. High costs of devices and Internet subscription were identified as two of the main constraints, but even more limiting is the environment in which women, especially those from low-income communities, often find themselves. These include institutional approaches and cultural attitudes about the role of women in society, leading to fewer opportunities for employment, education and mobility—and thus less earning capacity and literacy—which consequently reduce the chances for women to utilise the Internet.

Such restrictions mean that, at present, women tend to use mobile Internet less frequently and also less intensively than men, especially in rural areas. Many also lack confidence in using ICTs, whether in purchasing their own device or in going to public access kiosks, which may be overseen by men. Indeed, Google in its study found that most women do not have their own Internet-capable device but instead rely on shared devices to go online.

Organisations like the Internet Society have sought to address these hurdles by getting women to become active players in the Internet value chain, through initiatives that seek to empower women to set up Internet-related enterprises. But more efforts are needed. Panelists agreed that part of the difficulty in developing initiatives targeted to women is the lack of gender-disaggregated data. Thus far, GSMA’s own research suggests that women do use mobile devices differently than men, but what they use it for and what they perceive its value is to them has yet to be more comprehensively analysed.
Conclusion & Further Comments:

Several panelists emphasised the importance of looking into localised solutions—which may or may not be scalable—to more effectively reduce barriers to women going online, as these may be more suited to the specific socio-cultural and economic contexts in which these constraints exist. GSMA also pointed out that out-of-the-box initiatives that target women, while they may not appear to be commercially viable, have in numerous cases been successful enough to be part of a mobile operator or an ISP’s main offerings. More importantly, participants concurred that, while mobile Internet may help to bridge the gender digital gap, other modes of access must also be developed and made available to women regardless of the device or the network they are using.