



Gender Inclusion in ICTs

Gender inclusion in ICTs is vital to achieving equitable socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where societal norms and limited access to resources often curtail opportunities for women. With digital transformation reshaping economies, excluding women from this shift not only limits their potential to contribute to economic growth and social progress, but also exacerbates the existing gender gap. For Pakistan, digital gender inclusion is not merely a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for national progress and socio-economic advancement, given that women constitute half the country's population.

Bridging the digital gender gap involves far more than providing access to technology; it requires creating opportunities for women to leverage digital tools to improve their livelihoods, gain educational opportunities, and actively contribute to the digital economy. By integrating women into the digital space, Pakistan can unlock new avenues for innovation, economic resilience, and sustainable development. Empowering women with digital skills not only positions them as active contributors in sectors like e-commerce, education, and governance but also amplifies their voices in decision-making processes.

Prioritizing gender-sensitive policies, ensuring affordable access to digital platforms, and imparting digital skills to women constitute the mainstay of PTA's multi-stakeholder efforts to build a more inclusive digital society. This chapter outlines key interventions

implemented during the year under review to address these issues and promote digital gender inclusion.

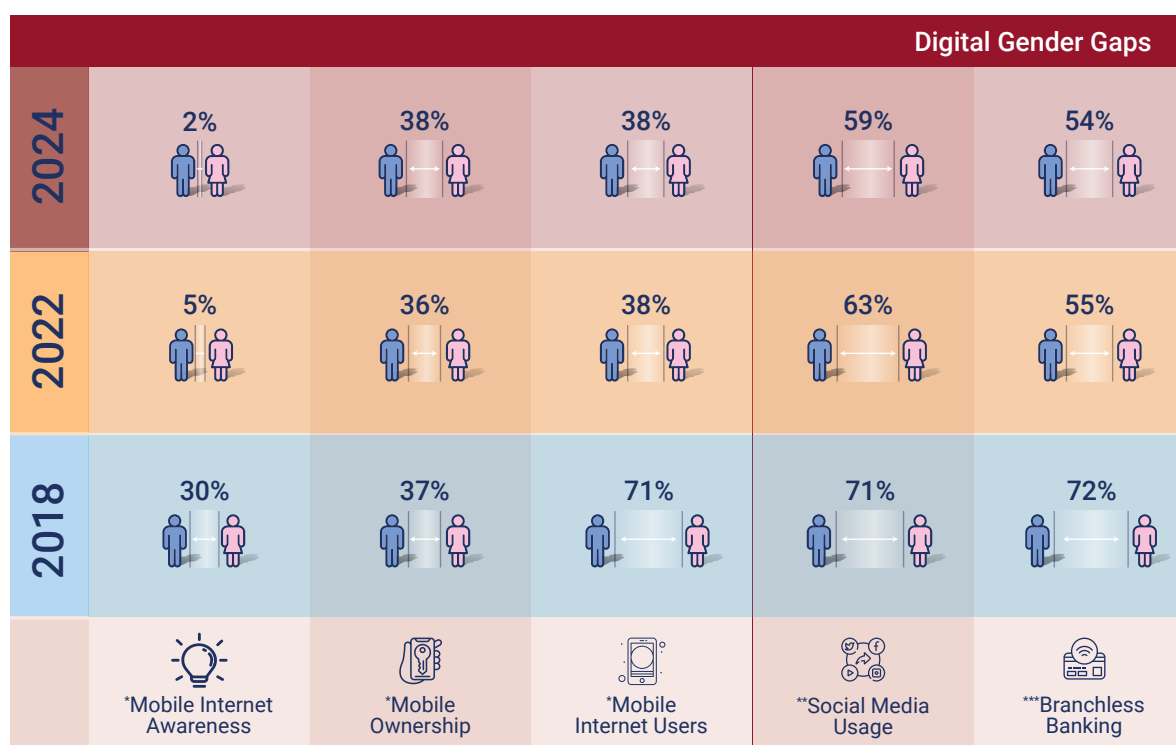
Bridging the Gender Gap through Digitalization



Over 66.2% of the world's population—equivalent to 5.3 billion people—is connected to the Internet. However, a notable digital gender gap persists, with 70% of men, compared to 65% of women, using the Internet. This disparity is even more pronounced in regions like the Asia Pacific and Lower-Middle Income Countries, where only 66% of women have access to mobile Internet.

In Pakistan, the 5th most populous country with 242 million people, women make up nearly half of the total demographic (49%; approximately 119 million). Unfortunately, women's participation in the economy, especially in the use of technology and digital spaces, remains alarmingly low. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, the Mobile Connectivity Index 2023, and the Inclusive Internet Index, Pakistan ranks among the lowest in terms of gender parity and digital inclusion. These reports highlight significant gaps in female education, mobile ownership, and Internet usage, underscoring the need to bridge the digital divide and promote equitable access to technology.

Pakistan places a strong emphasis on gender equality as enshrined in Article 25 of the country's Constitution and demonstrated through its commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator. The National Gender Policy Framework 2022 sets strategic priorities across



Source: *GSMA **Data Reportal (For YouTube only) ***Based on SBP data

interconnected sectors such as health, education, political participation, governance, and safety, all aimed at women's empowerment. Similarly, Pakistan's Vision 2025 and Digital Policy 2018 focus on creating an inclusive digital environment for women.

Despite these efforts, significant gender gaps persist in technology adoption, Internet usage, and mobile ownership. Key challenges include limited digital literacy, restricted access to financial services (such as bank accounts), absence of national identity (CNIC) for nearly 25% of adult women, high costs of devices and broadband, scarcity of local content, safety concerns, and patriarchal controls.

Bridging the gender divide requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach. This includes formulating gender-responsive policies, expanding access to affordable handsets, tariffs, and connectivity, and

developing women-centric, local-language content. It also involves promoting entrepreneurship, enhancing skill development, providing loans, and changing traditional societal norms to foster community support. PPPs and the strategic use of ICTs are crucial to women's empowerment.

In line with this multi-pronged approach, PTA implemented several initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divide by mainstreaming women in the ICT sector. Initiatives from provincial IT boards, Ignite, National Information Technology Board (NITB), PSEB, and USF are making significant contributions. The private sector, especially mobile operators like Jazz, also played a commendable role in driving gender inclusion. Efforts to narrow the digital divide were further augmented with support from international organizations such as GSMA, UNESCO, and Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP).



Gender Gap Comparison

Gender disparity remains a significant challenge across Pakistan's digital and financial sectors, particularly in Mobile Broadband (MBB) subscriptions, social media usage, and branchless banking accounts. Although female participation has increased over the years, males continue to dominate these areas. Societal norms, such as reliance on male family members' CNICs for mobile services, contribute to underreporting of female MBB subscriptions. In social media, platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok reflect a stark gender imbalance, though Instagram shows a relatively narrower gap, suggesting gradual progress in some digital spaces.

In the financial sector, branchless banking has seen considerable growth in female account ownership, indicating a positive trend towards financial inclusion. However, despite these improvements, a significant gender gap remains, underscoring the need for focused efforts to ensure equal access to financial services. Overall, while steps have been taken to bridge these gaps, relevant data highlights the continued need for targeted strategies to create a more inclusive digital and financial landscape for women in Pakistan.

Mobile Broadband Subscribers and Branchless Accounts

	*MBB Subscribers			**Branchless Banking Accounts		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2020-21	79.0	21.0	100.0	55.8	18.9	74.7
2021-22	87.9	26.4	114.3	63.7	24.8	88.5
2022-23	93.1	29.8	122.9	74.5	32.4	106.9
2023-24	100.0	33.0	133.0	81.6	35.7	117.3

Note: *Male/Female CNIC-based subscriptions (No. of Active SIMs). Mostly, females in Pakistan use mobile service subscribed/registered on the CNICs of their male family members. As such, female subscriptions are downward-biased.

**Figures for 2023-24 are as of March 2024.

Source: *Pakistan Telecommunication Authority; **State Bank of Pakistan.

Share of Social Media Users (Jan. 2024)

Social Media	Total Users (In Millions)	Male	Female	Gender Gap
*Facebook	60.4	77%	24%	68%
**YouTube	71.7	72%	28%	59%
**TikTok	54.4	78%	22%	71%
**Instagram	17.3	64%	36%	41%

Note: Gender gap is calculated as [(Male user/Male pop-Female user/Female pop)]/ (Male user/Male pop).

Source: *NapoleonCat; **Data Reportal.

Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy

PTA has developed the Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy under the patronage of MoITT, with support from UNESCO Pakistan and extensive collaborations with international telecom organizations, civil society, tech industry, government entities, and the development sector. The strategy addresses the barriers hindering women's access to mobile and ICT services and sets forth an accelerated action plan with an implementation roadmap, timelines, and measurable outcomes.

Objectives of the Strategy

- Setting policy priorities based on an understanding of women's circumstances, challenges, and needs through gender-disaggregated data-gathering and research.
- Identifying the specific needs for policy and regulatory interventions that can help bridge the digital gender divide.
- Defining measures that can be initiated to address the digital gender divide.
- Creating a platform and governance framework for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the effective coordination of joint efforts to address the digital gender divide.

Focusing on mainstreaming gender in ICTs, the strategy seeks to empower women to actively engage in Pakistan's digital transformation and reap its socio-economic benefits. By integrating contributions from a diverse range of national and international stakeholders, the plan targets six core areas essential to reducing the digital divide: Data and Research, Accessibility, Affordability, Digital Skills, Inclusion (advocacy and awareness), and Safety and Security. These focus areas emerged from a comprehensive consultation process which included workshops, meetings, and nationwide surveys (online, IVR, and physical), specifically in regions with zero digital connectivity.

National Launch and Implementation of the Strategy

PTA, in collaboration with MoITT, successfully launched Pakistan's first-ever Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy and its implementation at the Digital Nation Summit held in Islamabad on August 7, 2024. Chairman PTA, Major General (R) Hafeez Ur Rehman, and Minister of State for ITT, Ms. Shaza Fatima Khawaja, formally handed over the strategy to Minister for Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives, Mr. Ahsan Iqbal, for its implementation. During the launch, Chairman PTA outlined the objectives of the strategy, with an emphasis on areas aimed at narrowing the digital divide. He stressed the need for a coordinated whole-of-government approach to ensure effective implementation of interventions planned under the strategy.

The Digital Nation Summit served as a platform to highlight Pakistan's commitment to embracing digital technologies and fostering innovation in the ICT sector. Both ministers reaffirmed the government's commitment to successful implementation of the strategy.

Inaugural Meeting of Steering Committee

The inaugural meeting of the Steering Committee on Digital Gender Inclusion was convened in Islamabad

on August 7, 2024. The event, which marked the official commencement of the strategy's implementation, was chaired by Minister of State for IT and Telecom, Ms. Shaza Fatima Khawaja, and convened by Chairman PTA, Major General (R) Hafeez Ur Rehman.

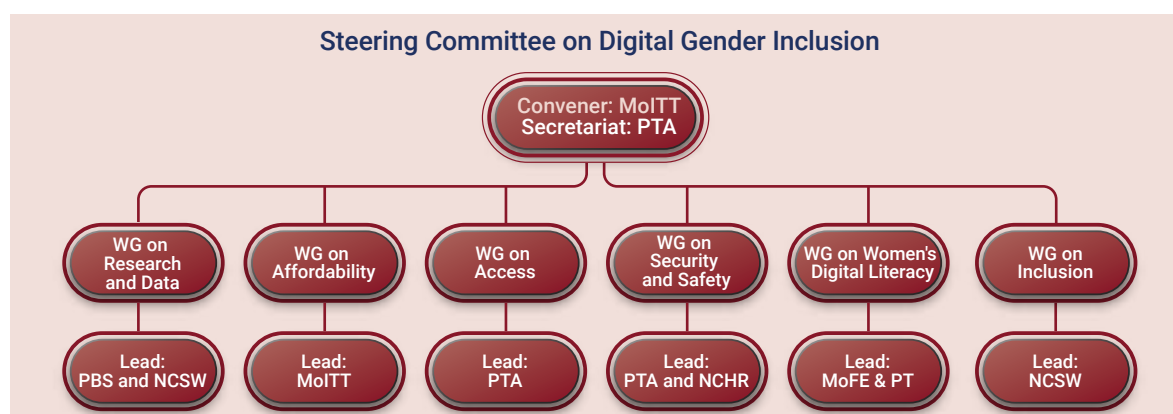
The committee's role is to oversee the smooth implementation of the strategy, with a focus on achieving a significant reduction in the digital gender gap within the next three years. It will continuously assess the progress of thematic working groups focused on the six core areas of the strategy. This ongoing oversight will help track outcomes and ensure that the strategy effectively achieves its objectives.

The committee comprises representatives from relevant government organizations, private sector, and academia. These include members from the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFE and PT), Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, MoITT, HEC, National IT Board, Jazz, and the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

A Technical Advisory Group will assist the committee to fulfill its responsibilities. Representatives from UNESCO, GSMA, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership, APC, and TikTok, as well as heads of working groups including officials from PTA, the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), and NCSW participated in the discussions.



Chairman PTA, Major General (R) Hafeez Ur Rehman, alongside key stakeholders and participants at the inaugural Steering Committee meeting on Digital Gender Inclusion held in Islamabad on August 7, 2024



Strategy Presentation at MWC 2024

PTA presented the Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy at the GSMA Mobile World Congress 2024 in Barcelona, Spain. The strategy was deliberated upon for action-oriented implementation, with a focus on creating inclusive opportunities across different segments. Key global figures such as Assistant Director General for Communication and Information at UNESCO, Dr. Tawfik Jelassi, Head of Public Policy APAC at GSMA, Ms. Jeanette Whyte, and Head of Digital Inclusion for Mobile 4 Development at GSMA, Ms. Claire Sibthorpe, discussed the importance of collaborative efforts in driving digital inclusion.

Chairman PTA, Major General (R) Hafeez Ur Rehman, highlighted the objectives of the strategy and reiterated PTA's commitment to advancing gender equality within the digital space. Speaking on the occasion, he said, "The launch of this strategy marks our commitment to ensuring that the benefits of digital transformation are accessible to all, irrespective of gender. By actively involving women from various backgrounds, we aim to create a digital ecosystem that thrives on diversity, innovation, and equal opportunities."

Recognition by Asia Pacific Telecommunity

The Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT) recognized the significance of the Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy by placing it on its official website so that member countries can utilize it as a model for similar initiatives. The development of this strategy by Pakistan represents a targeted approach to addressing gender disparities in ICTs. What sets this strategy apart is that it has been developed by a telecom regulator, an uncommon practice. Its unique, methodical framework has earned widespread recognition on international platforms as one of the first of its kind. The strategy has been appreciated as an exemplary model, fit for replication by other developing countries.

Digital gender inclusion has become a global priority, with organizations like ITU, IGF, and the Broadband Commission also adopting a structured approach to address the issue by developing toolkits and handbooks. Many countries are actively working to reduce the gender gap by integrating gender-focused policies within their digital transformation agendas.

Strategic Partnerships for Gender Inclusion



In line with its commitment to gender mainstreaming in ICTs, PTA forged several strategic partnerships to

advance digital gender inclusion. Formal partnerships were established with the Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education (PAGE) and The Inclusion Lab, both of which have a strong presence in regions with limited access to education, low literacy rates, and significant gender disparities. These organizations bring specialized expertise in imparting education to out-of-school girls and promoting advocacy and awareness on digital inclusion.

The above partnerships were formalized through the signing of Non-Binding Cooperation Agreements for Digital Gender Inclusion across Pakistan, including AJ&K and GB. Through these agreements, the organizations pledged to equip girls from underserved areas with essential digital skills, enabling them to excel in the 21st Century digital economy and fully engage in socio-economic development.

Action Coalition with NCSW and GSMA

PTA joined an Action Coalition by signing a tripartite agreement with NCSW and GSMA. The objective of this coalition is to advance the economic empowerment of women in Pakistan by launching a nationwide awareness campaign aimed at addressing the digital gender divide, alongside the implementation of a mobile digital skills training programme.

Award of APNIC Foundation Project

APNIC, in its recent round of supporting organizations to bridge the digital divide, extended its backing to PAGE for launching an innovative project titled, 'Digital Taleem Apki Dehliz Per' (Digital Learning at Your Doorstep). Backed by a grant from APNIC Foundation, the project focuses on key aspects such as inclusivity, affordability, and diversity to create a more equitable educational landscape for girls in rural areas. The aim is to bridge the digital divide, create equitable educational opportunities, and promote digital literacy by providing the necessary resources for e-learning.

PTA and APNIC Foundation share a common objective—fostering an inclusive and accessible digital education platform for girls in Sindh through PAGE.

ITU Partner2Connect Digital Coalition



In January 2024, PTA completed its pledge under the ITU Partner2Connect Digital Coalition and transitioned into the implementation phase of its comprehensive plan to reduce the digital gender divide in Pakistan with the involvement of multi-stakeholder groups. The genesis of this initiative dates back to 2021, when



ITU launched a multi-stakeholder alliance to foster meaningful connectivity and digital transformation globally, with a focus on hardest-to-connect communities. This effort was aligned with the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and developed in close cooperation with the Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Technology, and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States.

Through its involvement in the ITU Digital Coalition, PTA demonstrated proactive leadership in embracing multi-stakeholder collaboration to address digital inclusion challenges so that advancements in technology lead to equitable benefits across the society.

International Women's Day and ITU Girls in ICT Day

While lack of awareness on digital skills and Internet usage are key factors behind the digital divide, additional barriers such as lack of access to affordable devices and ownership of SIM cards and mobile handsets by women significantly hinder women's entry into the digital world.

To commemorate International Women's Day and ITU Girls in ICTs Day, PTA launched targeted digital awareness campaigns across print and digital media platforms. The objective was to build women's confidence in owning a mobile SIM card and handset, while highlighting the transformative benefits of Internet access for personal, educational, and economic empowerment.

As part of these efforts, telecom operators conducted a special SIM sale activity for women on March 24,

2024. Women received free SIM cards after proper verification through NADRA. The initiative, which was conducted by female sales staff, specifically targeted women's educational institutions and markets, creating a welcoming environment for participants.



IWD 2024
Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress

LET'S CHAMPION DIGITAL INCLUSION!

Invest in Women for Digital Progress of Pakistan.

We are committed to boosting digital skills, ensuring affordable access to Internet, mobile devices and SIMs for women, creating and promoting local content, and implementing crucial measures for online safety.

Towards progressive Pakistan- #HerDigitalPakistan

Where every woman can shape her digital destiny.

PTA Pakistan Telecommunication Authority
www.pta.gov.pk
@PTAOfficialPK/

Way Forward

The trajectory of digital inclusion in Pakistan appears promising. By implementing a structured approach, the country can effectively address the existing digital divide, primarily driven by issues of affordability and access. Engaging all stakeholders, fostering collaboration, and ensuring continuous evaluation will be crucial for achieving lasting change and bridging the digital gender gap.