

GUIDANCE NOTE

NOVEMBER 2023

Digital Gender Equality



UNHCR providing training to 19 Warao Indigenous artisans to access online marketplaces – Brazil

PHOTO: UNHCR



Background

The digital age has brought countless opportunities and benefits for people across the world. However, for more than 50 million forcibly displaced women and girls worldwide,¹ these opportunities often remain limited or even out of reach.²

In many forcibly displaced communities, **women and girls face multiple and compounding barriers to their inclusion in the broader digital ecosystem** and are often excluded in both accessing and using technology. These challenges stem from highly regulated policy environments to access Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) registration, limited access to digital devices, affordability, lack or low levels of digital literacy and skills, harmful sociocultural norms, stereotypes and bias and online gender-based violence.

The consequences of this digital gender divide are severe and render forcibly displaced women and girls unable to fully participate in a connected society, access life-saving information and resources that are vital for their protection and safety.

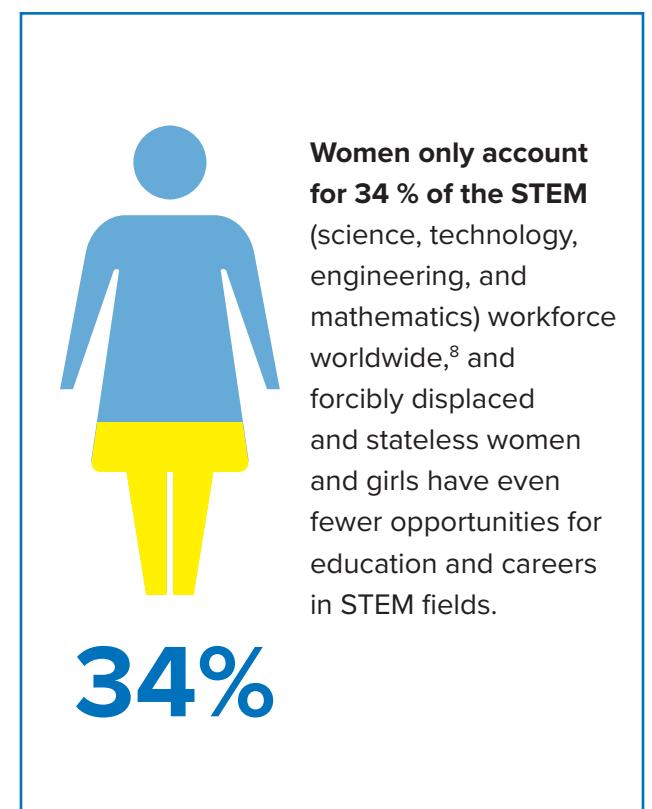
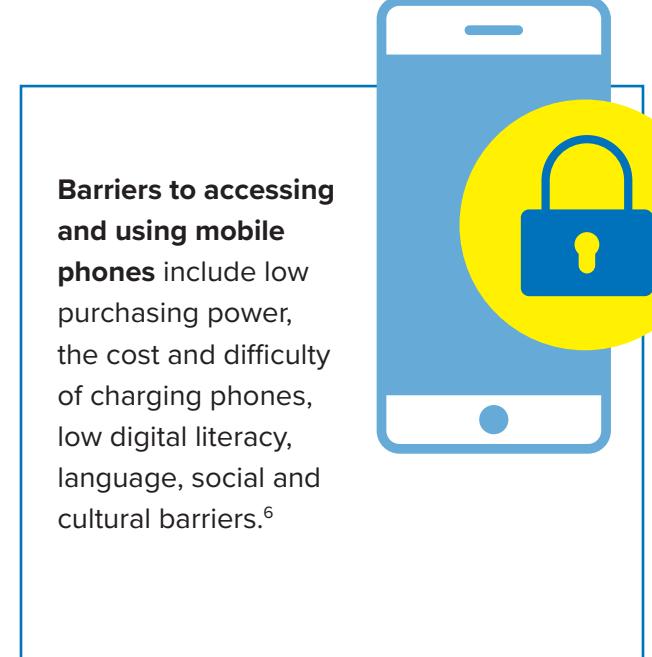
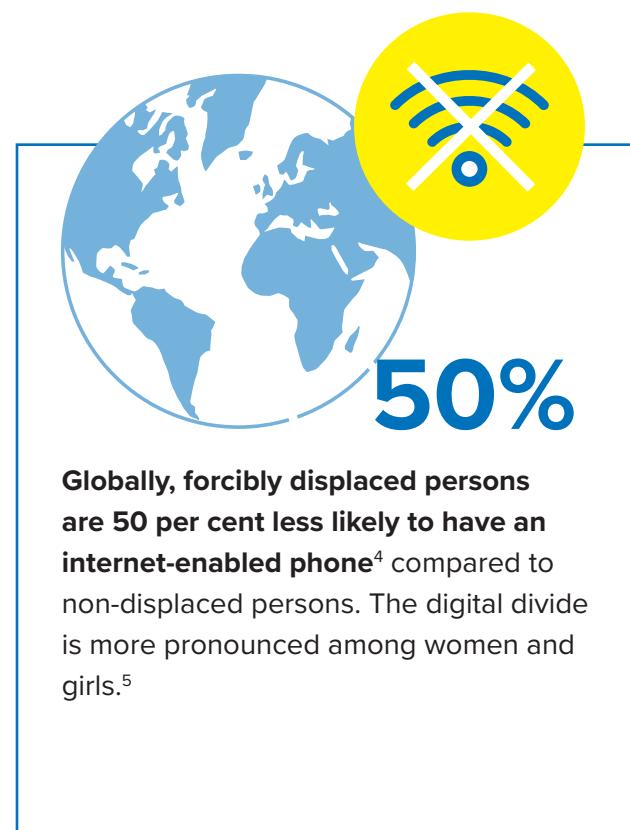
Additionally, women and girls face barriers to access the many opportunities that digital technology offers including education,

livelihood, and leisure opportunities. This exacerbates the already existing inequalities and heightens their vulnerability. Refugees with disabilities have also reported literacy and digital literacy barriers to using mobile phones and internet.³

The **UN Secretary General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation** highlights the challenges forcibly displaced people face in their digital inclusion and the need for an intersectional and gender-differentiated approach to understand their vulnerabilities to digitalization and identifying adequate risk mitigation actions.

UNHCR's Digital Transformation Strategy 2022–2026 is aligned with this UN-wide strategic direction and points to digital inclusion as a priority outcome. UNHCR is committed to bridging the digital gender divide among forcibly displaced and stateless people to ensure no one is left behind in the digital age.

Key facts and figures



The **impact** of the digital gender divide on forcibly displaced women and girls

The term ‘digital gender divide’ refers to the disparity between women, men, girls and boys in relation to digital adoption and their relative opportunities to access, use and benefit from digital technology.⁹ Forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls are disproportionately impacted due to various factors, including:

1. Legal and regulatory frameworks

In many refugee-hosting countries, legal and regulatory requirements mandate that an individual’s identity (ID) is authenticated before accessing a mobile connection (i.e., SIM registration), bank account, or mobile money account. For forcibly displaced and stateless persons without valid passports and IDs, these requirements significantly hinder their access to digital opportunities.¹⁰ Stateless women and girls face even greater challenges in acquiring individual documentation and registration. As a result, many forcibly displaced and stateless women use informal workarounds such as asking local people to buy SIM cards on their behalf, which could lead to potential exploitation and abuse,¹¹ including transactional sex for SIM cards and mobile connections.

2. Connectivity infrastructure

In many areas – particularly rural areas – a lack of reliable electricity and internet connectivity limits the ability of forcibly displaced people to access digital services. Connectivity spaces, such as community connectivity centers and internet cafés, are often male-dominated.¹² Even the limited areas with better connectivity inside refugee camps or settlements are usually occupied by men. While many refugee camps and settlements have women-friendly spaces (WFS), these facilities are not necessarily connected to the internet.



Digital gender divide:

The disparity between women, men, girls and boys in relation to digital adoption and their relative opportunities to access, use and benefit from digital technology

3. Affordability

Even in areas where internet connectivity is available, forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls have limited access to mobile devices or computers compared to men due to lower purchasing power.¹³ Across Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), affordability is the top barrier preventing women from owning a phone and using mobile internet.¹⁴ Many of them share the devices with their partners, children, and friends,¹⁵ and the prohibitive cost of internet data also hinders their access to the internet.¹⁶

4. Limited access due to harmful socio-cultural norms

In many forcibly displaced communities, there are additional barriers from deep-rooted gender norms that discourage women and girls from accessing digital technologies. Often, access to mobile phones is dependent on male gatekeepers,¹⁷ and women and girls lack independent and private access to mobile phones and other digital devices.¹⁸ The burdening gender roles assigned to women and girls as primary caregivers may limit their opportunities to focus on digital literacy and skills training.¹⁹

5. Disruption of learning and connected education

The barriers to educating forcibly displaced women and girls are multiple and interrelated. Social-cultural barriers linked to early marriage, teenage pregnancies, domestic chores, and poverty remain key concerns. Concerns over safety, distances to school, and schooling costs (direct, indirect, and opportunity costs) lead to non-enrolment. As social and cultural gender norms tend to favour men and boys' access to STEM education,²⁰ a growing digital gender divide affects women and girls worldwide, placing them at a disadvantage in accessing mobile devices, using the internet, and developing digital skills.²¹ Heightened disruption to education may reinforce this divide, lead to missed opportunities, and further marginalize displaced women and girls in the digital era.

6. Digital literacy and skills

Forcibly displaced women and girls often have lower levels of digital literacy and skills.

Studies have shown that various factors such as education, employment, and economic resources contribute to the fear of technology.²² As women and girls have fewer educational and employment opportunities than men and boys,²³ they are more likely to lack the digital literacy and skills to safely navigate connected devices and services.

7. Exposure to digital risks

Forcibly displaced women and girls are more likely to encounter digital risks and online harm and violence compared to their male counterparts. Their lack of digital literacy and access further perpetuates their vulnerability and hinders their ability to understand and navigate online platforms safely. For example, among refugee women in Papua New Guinea, misinformation and disinformation have been reported as being used to target personal relationships, creating conflict in communities.²⁴ There are also serious concerns over scams and financial exploitation, with phishing messages and fraudulent calls being a major concern for people with low digital literacy, who are predominantly forcibly displaced women.²⁵

8. Safety and security

Social media and other online platforms not only amplify the existing safety and security risks for women and girls but also specifically target them. These risks include online harassment and abuse, gender-based violence, online grooming, human trafficking, and exploitation. Notable examples of such risks have been reported by the Ukrainian refugee community, with numerous incidents of exploitation and abuse targeting Ukrainian refugee women in host countries. With a growing number of Ukrainians resorting to social media for assistance and support, traffickers and abusers started using social media to target Ukrainian women for human trafficking or search for potential marriage candidates, as many women unwittingly disclosed critical details about their location and challenging circumstances.²⁶

9. Lack of disaggregated data on the digital gender gap

Despite the growing global attention given to gender and digitalization, the availability of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data on digital inclusion and the digital divide is scarce,²⁷ particularly pertaining to forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls.²⁸ More research, data, evidence, and analyses are critical to identify areas where interventions are needed and track progress over time to close the digital gender gap.

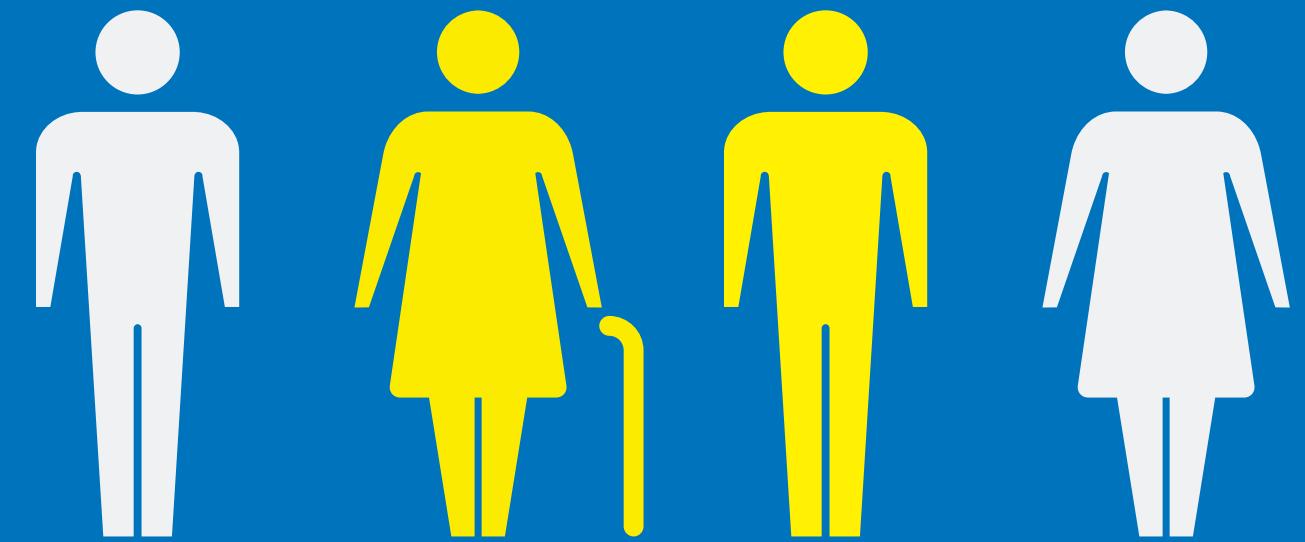
UNHCR is committed to:

bridging the digital gender divide among forcibly displaced and stateless people to ensure **no one is left behind in the digital age**.

A digital literacy workshop for the 'Wise Browsing, Safe Posting' project supported through the UNHCR Digital Innovation Fund – Hungary



How UNHCR is dismantling the digital gender divide



UNHCR's efforts to bridge the digital gender divide are guided by **the Policy on Age, Gender, and Diversity**, which recognizes the diversity among forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls and highlights how an intersectional approach is key when working with forcibly displaced persons. As part of its institutional efforts to enhance **accountability to affected people (AAP)**,²⁹ UNHCR has implemented a wide variety of digital interventions across operations, to ensure that all forcibly displaced persons enjoy equal, meaningful, and safe access to digital technologies and opportunities.

Aligned with the **Digital Transformation Strategy 2022–2026**, **UNHCR's Digital Innovation Programme** spearheads innovative approaches to ensure digital inclusion, digital protection, and digital services for forcibly displaced and stateless communities. Bridging the digital gender gap is an essential part of this work. UNHCR is committed to promoting equitable and inclusive digital access and closing the digital gender divide among forcibly displaced and stateless people to ensure no one is left behind in the digital age.

Good practices and lessons learned



Participants attending the launch event for a community-led connectivity project supported through UNHCR's Digital Innovation Fund – Colombia



Internet infrastructure being set up for the community-led connectivity project – Colombia

1

Funding innovative digital initiatives

UNHCR's Digital Innovation Fund aims to provide UNHCR teams and community members the space, support, tools, and expertise they need to responsibly explore forward-thinking and innovative approaches to digital inclusion, digital protection, and digital services. By innovating with and for communities, UNHCR works to empower them to safely leverage digital technologies in a way that enhances their well-being and self-reliance. An area for further development relates to how best to dismantle the digital gender divide, how to enhance safe and independent access and inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls through innovative interventions.

2

Digital gender inclusion and innovation bootcamp

UNHCR Innovation launched its first **Digital Gender Inclusion and Innovation Bootcamp** on International Women's Day 2023, which was focused on **innovation and technology for gender equality**. The Bootcamp aimed to equip community-based, refugee-led, and/or women-led organizations with dedicated learning and resources to **bridge the digital gender gap** and provide seed funding to develop creative ideas.

3

Understanding the legal and regulatory environment

The Innovation Service's **Displaced and Disconnected research** provides a systematic understanding of the legal and regulatory requirements that set the parameters around refugees' access to mobile connectivity and digital financial inclusion. Through the research, UNHCR operations can identify the primary barriers to refugees' digital inclusion in each host country for targeted advocacy for the government and mobile network operators.

4

Supporting connectivity infrastructure through connected community center and community-led Initiatives

UNHCR also supports community-led internet networks, enabling forcibly displaced communities – with a strong focus on women – to take a key role in the design and implementation of connectivity solutions



UNHCR Brazil providing training to 19 Warao indigenous artisans to access online marketplaces – Brazil



Refugee women co-creating digital literacy curriculum – Indonesia

5

Women's economic empowerment through digital livelihoods

Digital livelihoods including selling handcrafted items online and remote work are becoming more popular among refugee women for income-generating activities. Under the **PROSPECTS Inclusive Digital Economy project** supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, UNHCR Egypt has set up **co-working spaces** in Cairo to address access barriers to digital livelihoods and remote work, with a special emphasis on fostering an inclusive environment for refugee women. Meanwhile, UNHCR Brazil has provided training to 19 Warao indigenous artisans – most of whom are women – to **access online marketplaces** and manage digital risks, enabling them to safely and effectively promote their handcrafted products online, access digital livelihoods, and scale up their businesses.

6

Digital protection from online gender-based violence (GBV) and risks

In Ecuador, UNHCR and its partners produced Communication with Communities (CwC) products, including a **digital guide** containing recommendations on how to safely navigate online, for GBV prevention and response. In addition, with the support of the Digital Innovation Fund, UNHCR Hungary developed a project called '**Wide Browsing, Safe Posting**' to establish a community-based vetting system for suspicious or malicious posts and enhance the skills of refugees and social media administrators in identifying and reporting to prevent the Ukrainian refugee women from any digital risks and exploitation.

7

Co-creating digital literacy interventions with communities

UNHCR believes that co-creating and delivering digital literacy interventions alongside communities is critical. In Indonesia, **low levels of digital literacy** prevent refugees and asylum-seekers from accessing services, receiving relevant information, and using digital tools. For women, this challenge is amplified by a perception among some communities that the internet is not for them. To bring down these barriers, UNHCR Indonesia, supported by the Digital Innovation Fund, has **co-created a digital literacy curriculum with refugees** and is exploring how to deliver this training through a community-based, refugee-led approach. The curriculum includes a debunking of gendered myths about online spaces as well as information about ways to mitigate digital risk – and one partner organization, led by women refugees, specifically focuses on training women and girls for its delivery.

8

Bolstering the evidence on mobile gender gaps

Through partnerships with the private sector and research institutions, UNHCR conducted research to better understand and tackle the barriers women and girls face to digital inclusion. **'The Digital Worlds of Displacement-Affected Communities'** report, in partnership with GSMA explores forcibly displaced people's use of mobile phones while featuring the gender gap in Lebanon, Papua New Guinea, and South Sudan. More collaborative research between UNHCR and GSMA on similar topics includes **Bridging the Mobile Gender Gap for Refugees based in Bidibidi, Uganda; The Digital Lives of Refugees based in Jordan, Rwanda, and Uganda**; and **Mobile is a Lifeline from Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Tanzania**. Furthermore, together with the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, UNHCR documented the evidence on digital leisure in Brazil with gender dimensions in the forced displacement context in our **Digital Leisure Divide** report.

UNHCR firmly believes that all displaced individuals have the right and the choice to be part of a connected society, utilizing technology to build better futures for themselves, their families and communities, and the world. Together we can break down the digital gender divide.

Endnotes

- 1 UNHCR (2022). Refugee Data Finder. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/forcibly-displaced-pocs.html>
- 2 GSMA (2019). Bridging the mobile gender gap for refugees. https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/M4H_GenderGapRefugeeContexts.pdf
- 3 GSMA (2019) Bridging the mobile disability gap in refugee settings https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/M4H_DisabilityGap.pdf
- 4 UNHCR (2016). Connecting Refugees: How Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-Being and Transform Humanitarian Action. https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/20160707-Connecting-Refugees-Web_with-signature.pdf
- 5 GSMA (2019). The Digital Lives of Refugees. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/blog/the-digital-lives-of-refugees-how-displaced-populations-use-mobile-phones-and-what-gets-in-the-way/>
- 6 GSMA (2022). The Digital Worlds of Displacement-Affected Communities. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/the-digital-worlds-of-displacement-affected-communities/>
- 7 Alliance for Financial Inclusion (2022). The Financial Inclusion of Forcibly Displaced Women. <https://www.afi-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-Financial-Inclusion-of-Forcibly-Displaced-Women.pdf>
- 8 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021). Women in Science. <https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/women-science>
- 9 UN Women (2023). Glossary: Gender and Technology. <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/03/glossary-gender-and-technology#:~:text=Gender%20digital%20divide,ands%20benefit%20from%20digital%20technology>
- 10 UNHCR (2022). Displaced and Disconnected. <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/displaced-and-disconnected/>
- 11 Gillespie M, Osseiran S, Cheesman M. Syrian refugees and the digital passage to Europe: Smartphone infrastructures and affordances. Soc Media Soc. 2018;4(1):1–12.
- 12 UN Women (2020). Gender and the Digital Divide in Situations of Displacement: The Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Al-Azraq and Al-Za'atari camps. <https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/gender-and-the-digital-divide>
- 13 GSMA. (2022). Ibid.
- 14 GSMA (2023). The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023. https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/?utm_source=website&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2023
- 15 UNHCR. (2021a). Digital access, communication needs and community practices. https://www.cwc.westafrica.exposed/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UNHCR_2021_V1_ENG.pdf
- 16 GSMA (2019). Ibid.
- 17 UNHCR (2023). The Digital Leisure Divide and the Forcibly Displaced. Part 2: Field Research. <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-Digital-Leisure-Divide-Field-Research.pdf>
- 18 GSMA (2022). Ibid.
- 19 UN Women. (2020). Ibid.
- 20 UNESCO, 2017, Girls and STEM: [Cracking the Code https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000253479](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000253479)
- 21 UNICEF, 2023, Bridging the Digital Gender Divide <https://data.unicef.org/resources/ictgenderdivide/>
- 22 Khorshed Alam and Sophia Imran (2015). The Digital Divide and Social Inclusion among Refugee Migrants: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ITP-04-2014-0083/full/html>; Kristy Crabtree and Petronille
- 23 Singh, S. (2017). Bridging the gender digital divide in developing countries. Journal of Children and Media, 11(2), 245–247.
- 24 GSMA. (2022). Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Hoff, S. and de Volder, E. (2022). Preventing human trafficking of refugees from Ukraine: A rapid assessment of risks and gaps in the anti-trafficking response. https://freedomfund.org/wp-content/uploads/UkraineAntiTraffickingReport_2022_05_10.pdf
- 27 UN Women (2022). Gendered Nature of Digital Inequality: evidence for policy considerations. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/BP1_Alison%20Gillwald.pdf
- 28 GSMA (2019). Bridging the mobile gender gap for refugees.
- 29 UNHCR Accountability to Affected People Operational Guidance <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/aap/?query=aap>



UNHCR
Innovation
Service

Connect with us

Gender Equality Unit, Division of International Protection

✉ hqagd@unhcr.org

Innovation Service

✉ hqconref@unhcr.org



[@unhcrinnovation](https://twitter.com/unhcrinnovation) and [@refugee_gender](https://twitter.com/refugee_gender)