

Women in developing countries lag behind in digitalisation

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Sixty-two percent of all men use the internet, whereas the figure for women is 57 percent. While the differences in digital access and use between the genders in industrialized countries is small, women in the

least developed countries are twelve percentage points behind men.

Associate Professor Ali Acilar and Professor Øystein Sæbø at the University of Agder have conducted a systematic literature review of research on the digital [gender](#) divide from the years 2010–2020. In the article "Towards understanding the gender digital divide," they point to social and cultural conditions to explain the differences.

"The question is whether information technology reinforces gender differences that already exist, or whether giving women greater access to technology will lessen the difference. It is possible to claim both," Acilar says.

Obstructed by social structures

Several aid projects have been launched to give women increased access to technology. On the one hand, the intention has been to reduce the [gender differences](#). On the other hand, it has been claimed that women who gain access to technology have a positive effect on the family and culture as a whole, which leads to more people using the technology.

"A project we are researching in Kenya illustrates the challenge with this perspective. Due to the [social structures](#) in patriarchal societies, women cannot utilize the technology, simply because the men won't allow them to use it," Sæbø says.

Three levels of difference

"The digital divide has three levels," Acilar says. "The first level is about access to technology. The second level is about how people use technology in different ways. The third level is about what kind of advantages people get from the use.

Studies show that public measures to reduce the [digital divide](#) between the genders often fail in developing countries. Such programs should take social and [cultural factors](#) into account," Acilar says.

"Access to [information technology](#) is changing society, so does the use of technology. But if we don't do something about the underlying inequalities in society, it's not possible to achieve real change," Acilar says.

Cannot explain Norwegian differences

In industrialized countries such as Norway, there is in practice no difference in the access men and women have to technology. This can make us forget important aspects of the issue, the researchers believe.

"Is the access to technology so good that we forget that digital literacy is not evenly distributed between the genders?" Acilar asks.

The researchers were surprised by how difficult it was to explain the difference between women and men in Norway when it comes to studying technology.

"Internationally, we can point to several factors: Family income and background. The network of parents and friends. And that in most countries, young boys will have a completely different access to such studies than young girls," Sæbø says.

Further research on Norway needed

Nevertheless, technology studies in Norway are dominated by men.

"When we look at it from an international perspective, we should have

had a much more even gender balance in our study programs. It turns out that factors that are important in other countries are weaker in the Norwegian context. We are currently exploring this further," Sæbø says.

One hypothesis the researchers examine is that the universities have not been able to show how important technology subjects are in a wider context.

"It may be difficult to see how [technology](#) is a tool for change which can make the world a better place. If this is something that can explain the motivation for choosing a course of study, then that is something we can work on," Sæbø says.

Facts: The digital divide in the world

- Access to the internet has become more equal between the genders in recent years.
- Gender parity is deemed achieved when the female per centage divided by the male per centage stands between 0.98 and 1.02.
- While the gender parity score was 0.89 in 2018, it had increased to 0.92 in 2020.
- Parity has been achieved in developed countries as a whole and in the Americas, and almost achieved in the Commonwealth of Independent States, the [small island](#) developing states (SIDS) and Europe.
- The divide remains wide in the least developed countries, where only 19 percent of [women](#) are using the internet (12 percentage points lower than men), Africa (24 percent versus 35 percent) and the Arab States (56 percent versus 68 percent).

Provided by University of Agder

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