

ENABLING ECOSYSTEMS FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S DIGITAL INCLUSION

Community-Based Research in
Rwanda Led by Young Women

June 2023



INTRODUCTION



DOT believes that when young women are equipped with digital literacy and skills AND they are supported by an enabling ecosystem of partners, they can achieve transformative change in their communities that can outlast any single project or program.

DOT's Ecosystem Approach to Tackling Gender Inequality

Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) is an international NGO headquartered in Ottawa, Canada, with local offices in Africa and the Middle East. DOT mobilizes and inspires all underserved and disadvantaged young people with digital literacy, 21st-century skills and the self-confidence that will enable them to thrive in an inclusive digital economy.

DOT Rwanda is an affiliate of DOT established in 2010 with long-standing operations and networks of local and international partners that extend across diverse communities in urban and rural settings. Over 13 years, DOT Rwanda has demonstrated outstanding multiplier effects by mobilizing 956 (more than 50% young women) youth leaders, who in turn have trained 117,959 (60,557 women, 57,402 men) community members.

Daring to Shift (D2S) is a 4-year project in partnership with Global Affairs Canada that places young women at the center of inclusive growth, focusing on equipping tens of thousands of youth with digital skills for jobs and business and supporting them with the skills, knowledge, tools, and networks to become social entrepreneurs.

Co-designed with youth, D2S trusts young people as drivers of their own livelihoods, and as peer-to-peer trainers, coaches, mentors, and role models in their communities. It is building a future where young women and men can co-create innovative solutions with development partners, to achieve enhanced gender equality, increase digital literacy, and accelerate inclusion and growth. At the heart of D2S is bridging the gender digital divide; To do so, DOT takes a gender equity approach. This includes reaching at least 70% young women as participants in our training programs.

However, we know that it is not sufficient to build individual capacity among our young women participants alone. To tackle the gender digital divide and gender inequality, we need to work in collaboration across the 'digital social innovation ecosystem'. This ecosystem is also made up of policy makers, regional bodies, national and local governments, civil society organizations, research institutions, education providers, employers, and private sector service providers (Financial Service Providers, Business Development Services, Mobile and Internet).

Key Terms:

- **DOT's Young Women Researchers (YWRs):** DOT Rwanda recruited 8 young women from Daring to Shift's Community Leader program to engage in a series of Participatory Community-Based Research workshops, and to lead Key Informant Interviews with local experts from Institutions involved in young women's digital inclusion, to generate youth-led community-based action research on the barriers young women face to build skills and experience in digitally enabled livelihoods and social innovation, and what policies, programs and/or approaches would better support their needs and priorities.
- **Gender Equality Community of Practice (GE CoP):** To build an enabling ecosystem, DOT Rwanda has convened a Gender Equality Community of Practice with local partners in the digital inclusion and youth livelihoods sector to learn, iterate, and improve how we all serve the communities we work with. By learning collaboratively together and sharing best practices for the inclusion of young women, the GE CoP will support more young women to access and meaningfully engage in opportunities for digital literacy and skills building, and for digitally enabled entrepreneurship.
- **Community Based Research (CBR):** CBR uses gender-transformative approaches that emphasize the importance of the process of generating research as much as the results, and aims to provide community members with tangible research skills while producing findings that speak to community-driven priorities. CBR provides an opportunity for community members to directly shape the direction and priorities of research and learning.
- **Young Women-Led Research:** DOT Rwanda is committed to our work being “For Women, By Women, With Women”. By starting with the engagement of young women at the inception of our CBR, this approach

shifts the traditional power dynamics of research and knowledge-building that tend to extract data without meaningful engagement with the community. The Young Women Researchers (YWRs) were responsible for completing co-design workshops to identify the scope of the problem when it comes to gender equality in the digital innovation ecosystem. The YWRs also defined the research questions that would frame the insights gathered, and therefore, shaped the content that stakeholders in the CoP would be learning from. As such, the findings in this report represent the priorities of these YWRs, and demonstrates their leadership in advocating for the priorities of young women in their communities.



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TO BRIDGE THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Globally, persistent barriers result in many young women struggling to gain skills and meaningful experiences with digital technology that can ensure that they are included in the digital shift. The global internet user gap is 17%, and the digital gender gap exists in all regions of the world – and continues to grow. In low and middle income countries, 433 million women are unconnected, and 165 million fewer women own a mobile phone compared with men². This means that boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls in many countries, and among those who do own phones, boys are more likely than girls to own smartphones.

Collaborating with the ecosystem to tackle the gender digital divide is pivotal to DOT Rwanda given that digital technology can create a snowball effect for young women, and be a game changer for economic and social inclusion. Digital technologies – and the ability to use them effectively – can position women to become financially independent and build their confidence, enabling women to join the workforce and earn an income through flexible pathways that may include accessing online education, starting their own businesses or participating in the informal economy³.

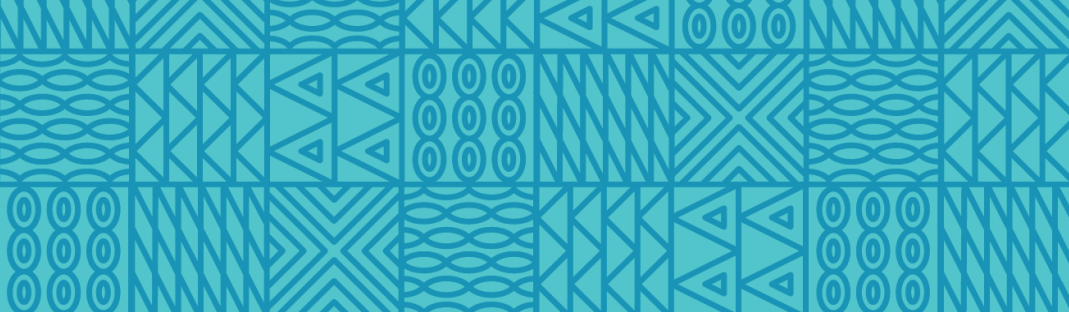
However, the gender digital divide in the 'digital social innovation ecosystem' is characterized by persistent and systemic barriers that are rooted in unequal gender norms, resulting in many young women struggling to gain digital literacy and skills and meaningful experience with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that would ensure that they are included in the digital shift. Globally, the gender digital divide is felt through overlapping barriers that limit young women's ability to apply their knowledge and skills to advance their careers and businesses, including but not limited to:

- Lack of and restricted access to digital infrastructure, tools, resources;
- Discriminatory gender norms and attitudes about young women's leadership abilities, and stigma against their use of digital tools and platforms;
- Lack of representation of women in STEM sectors and roles, and limited professional networks lifting women up and championing their leadership
- High levels of Technology-facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), and lack of safety and inclusion in online and offline spaces.

Addressing the gendered barriers in the digital innovation ecosystem is a critical outcome of D2S because digital literacy is one of the most in-demand skills across all workplaces, and youth that do not have access to digital resources, literacy, and skills are likely to be excluded from higher quality employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, further widening the gender gap in digital and economic inclusion.

The persistence of this gendered digital divide means that stakeholders need to work together at a systems level to bring together collaborators who also aim to support young women on their social innovation journey to learn, iterate, and improve how we all serve the communities we work with. To build this enabling ecosystem, DOT Rwanda has convened a Gender Equality Community of Practice (CoP) that includes local partners in the digital inclusion and youth livelihoods sector to create space and opportunity for collaborative learning from each other. DOT Rwanda, Young Women Researchers, and the CoP members developed the following shared objectives:

- Creating safe and inclusive environments for young women to be leaders in the digital economy
- Increased knowledge and skills, and improved mindsets among DOT's ecosystem partners
- Increased collaboration and impact among DOT's partner organizations working to close the gender digital divide



COUNTRY CONTEXT

According to the World Economic Forum report of 2022, Rwanda is ranked 6th globally and 1st in Africa in closing the gender gap⁴. Strong political commitment in Rwanda has resulted in significant positive strides in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, and these commitments have been mainstreamed in: Vision 2050, National Strategy for Transformation (NST-1), Smart Rwanda Master Plan 2020, The ICT Hub Strategic Plan (2019-2024), National Digital Talent Policy & various legal instruments and institutional mechanisms that support the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women and girls. A national Men-Engage strategy has been developed to promote men's role as allies and positive partners in the journey to the empowerment of women and girls in all sectors⁵.

The country's vision to become a knowledge-based economy and an upper middle-income country by 2035 is underpinned by its commitment to leveraging ICT to accelerate growth and poverty reduction. The Government of Rwanda has demonstrated commitment and a dedicated public policy towards the development of the country, utilizing ICT as one of the cross cutting enablers for social, political and economic development. Rwanda has been rated first among countries in the East African region in its readiness to adopt opportunities offered by ICT to boost economic growth⁶, and the country has emerged as a regional ICT hub with successful achievements in digitally-enabled business development and digital start-ups⁷. The Government of Rwanda aims to build "Inclusive, Transformative and Accountable Innovation Ecosystems" which includes creating gender-transformative innovation hubs, boosting women's participation in the tech workforce and leadership, mainstreaming gender in digital public policies, and defining indicators to better measure the gender digital divide and its impact on the digitalization of countries⁸. Within this digital transformation,

Rwanda is fully committed to leveraging digital technology as a means to accelerate economic growth and inclusion for all, especially women and girls, through:

- Rwanda has joined the Generation Equality Forum and made commitments to advance technology and innovation to close the gender digital divide for women and girls. The Government of Rwanda has undertaken a number of ambitious commitments towards this goal, including: To bridge the gender gap (50/50) in STEM at the upper secondary level by 2026; Attain 100% of mobile phone ownership per female headed household by 2026; Double the percentage of women who use digital financial services by 2026; and boost the number of girls and young women innovators that are being supported through innovation ecosystems⁵.
- The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) in collaboration with other stakeholders, developed a five-year (2021-2026) WEM-TECH strategy (Women Empowerment through Digital Technology). The WEM - TECH Strategy serves as a roadmap towards closing the gap in digital skills and access which limits women's ability to fully participate and benefit from the digital economy and an equitable "Knowledge Based Society". It covers various categories of women including young girls, women in urban and rural areas, in schools and off schools, researchers, educated and non-educated, as no one is to be left behind.
- Several initiative have been introduced to promote girls and women in ICT, including GIRLS in ICT mentorship and networking⁹, National ICT campaigns aimed at improving ICT awareness among young girls, MsGeek Rwanda encourages young girls to be innovative and develop new tech solutions, TechKobwa Boot Camps, and "Inkubito z'Icyeza" Forum for Excellence Clubs.¹⁰



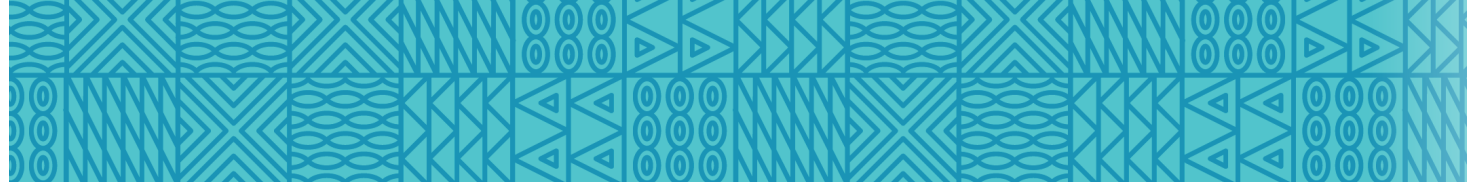
Despite significant progress in transforming Rwanda into a knowledge based society, there are still low levels of adoption of digital tools and services, and limited human capacity to reach the goal to build a knowledge economy, the low adoption level is for the most part attributable to low levels of digital literacy and skills among Rwandan citizens, particularly for young women¹¹. At a national level, digital literacy stands at only 20 percent, where as reported computer literacy is a mere 9 percent, and women's ICT literacy rate remains low at 7% compared to 11% of men¹³.

These gaps in digital literacy stand to widen the existing gaps in employment and entrepreneurship for young women; there is a significantly lower labor participation rate among women than men, and young women are subject to high unemployment and underemployment rates, and insecure roles that are low paying or unpaid¹⁴. In Rwanda, 83.4% of women work in the informal sector and/or are in low-wage occupations – earning, on average, 60% of men's incomes¹⁵. In fact, 59.2% of working women are engaged in unpaid farm work, a much higher proportion than working men¹⁶. The concentration of young women in low or unpaid roles stands to increase as more low-skilled jobs become automated, and having a higher level of digital literacy and skills becomes increasingly sought-after in the job market¹⁷.

There have been positive trends indicating a more inclusive and enabling ecosystem for women's entrepreneurship; for example, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) estimates that the number of registered women-owned businesses has increased from 27% in 2017 to 34% in 2022¹⁸. Women's ownership of individual enterprises has also increased from 38% in 2017 to 50% in 2022. However, more than 90% of enterprises in Rwanda are in the informal sector, and this lack of registration limits women's access to finance and other services¹⁹.

Further, the gender digital divide has intensified barriers to young women's entrepreneurship, and Rwanda's Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), especially those that are led by women (which dominate the local commercial landscape), have generally been slow to adopt digital business practices. As technology disrupts the way businesses operate, the gender gap in entrepreneurship is widening, as many women have less access to digital skills training, and there is limited digital content available in local languages to support their capacity building. Women entrepreneurs and women-led SMEs also navigate the lack of affordable access to ICT, socio-cultural restrictions, as well as a lack of access, control, and ownership of financial resources. As a result, many businesses and consumers remain wary of conducting business electronically, and often fail to see the potential benefits in terms of facilitating access to new markets and services²⁰.

¹¹Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Youth and ICT (2017) [National Digital Talent Policy](#), Kigali | ¹²World Bank. (2020). Rwanda Economic Update: [Accelerating Digital Transformation in Rwanda](#). No. 15. | ¹³Republic of Rwanda (2019) [Beijing +25 Rwanda Country Report](#) | ¹⁴ILOSTAT. Country profiles—Rwanda. (n.d). Retrieved February 23, 2022, from <https://lostat.ilo.org/data/country-profiles/> | ¹⁵WEF (2021) [Global Gender Gap Report](#) | ¹⁶Stevenson, L., & St-Onge, A. (2011). Assessment of the environment for the development of women's entrepreneurship in Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Senegal (Employment Report No. 15). International Labor Organization. | ¹⁷Petrone, P. 2019. The skills companies need most in 2019 and how to learn them. The Learning Blog, 1 January 2019. LinkedIn | ¹⁸Rwanda Development Board (2022). [Annual Report 2022: Beyond Recovery Towards Sustainable Economic Growth](#) | ¹⁹World Bank (2022) [Banking on Youth: Rwanda's Path to a 21st Century Economy](#) | ²⁰[Accelerating Digital Transformation in Rwanda: Rwanda Economic Update, January 2020, Edition 15](#)



DOT Rwanda's Co-Design of Participatory Community-Based Research

Given the imperative to increase capacity among the CoP members, DOT's Gender Team sought to understand how to use gender transformative approaches to research and learning that can shift the traditional power dynamics of who typically produces knowledge (research consultants, INGOs etc.), and who impacts decision-making over the design and implementation of new programs and policies.

Community-Based Action research used gender-transformative approaches that emphasize the importance of the empowering process of generating research as much as the results, and DOT worked to provide the YWRs

with tangible skills while producing research findings that speak to young women's community-driven priorities. By using this approach, DOT Rwanda and the YWDIE CoP assert that young women are the experts in the issues that impact them, and furthers the imperative of "Nothing About Us Without Us".

Our Researchers and Activities

DOT Rwanda recruited 8 Young Women Researchers (YWRs) from Daring to Shift's Community Leader program to engage in a series of Participatory Community-Based Research workshops, and to lead Key Informant Interviews with local experts from key Institutions involved in young women's digital inclusion, to generate youth-led community-based action research on the barriers young women face to build skills and experience in digitally enabled livelihoods and social innovation, and what policies, programs and/or approaches would better support their needs and priorities.

DOT Rwanda and the team of YWRs developed several key research questions through participatory community-based research workshops, including:

1. How can we ensure young women are meaningfully included in digital skills training, education, and experience opportunities?
2. What are the gaps in the digital skills and innovation ecosystem in terms of access, safety, and inclusion for young women?
3. What works to shift unequal gender norms within the digital social innovation ecosystem?



DOT Rwanda supported the team of YWRs to complete 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with experts from key institutions involved in young women's digital and economic inclusion, such as Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), Gender Monitoring Office (GMO), National Women Council (NWC), Rwanda Men's Resource Center (RWAMREC), KLAB, Girl Guide, Business Professionals Networks (BPN), Forum for African Women Education (FAWE RWANDA), Private Sector Federation (PSF), and National Youth Council (NYC), who generously shared their expertise and lessons learned through their ongoing work with young women.

Data was gathered and analyzed using a thematic qualitative method to identify patterns, themes, or categories within the data that can help researchers understand the underlying meanings and provide rich and nuanced insights into participants' experiences and perspectives.



It is high time that all stakeholders develop their own digital inclusion policies and programs, and embrace the urgency to ensure young women can access and meaningfully benefit from digital technology and innovation. ”

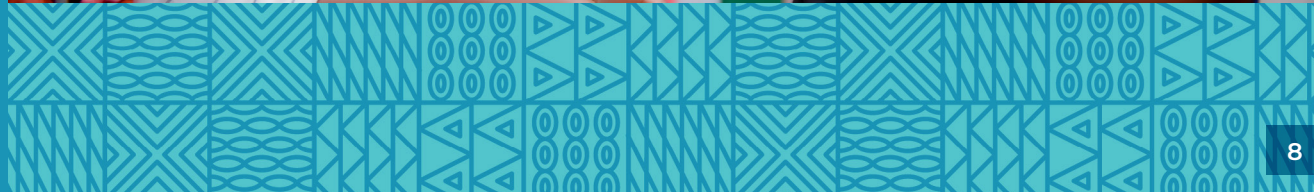
A Young Women Researcher, shared during Community Needs and Asset Mapping Workshops

What were the limitations of our CBR?

This participatory community-based research is not representative of all community-based perspectives among institutions, community-based organizations and other stakeholders in the digital social innovation ecosystem, and it is also not an exhaustive discussion of gender equality issues.

Instead, the findings shared in this report highlight a snapshot of the key issues that resonated most with current DOT Youth program participants and the institutions that were engaged in interviews, and their personal perspectives on these issues.

Another limitation was that there is limited availability of secondary and peer-reviewed data on enabling ecosystems for young women's digital inclusion. This means that in some cases, DOT was unable to validate some of the qualitative perspectives shared during KIIs using quantitative data. For example, insights shared related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are difficult to validate with quantitative data as the rates of GBV both online and offline are widely believed to be underreported globally.



COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH FINDINGS

An Enabling Ecosystem

DOT Rwanda's Young Women Researchers (YWRs) identified how consideration for meaningful inclusion needs to take a holistic approach that can respond to the overlapping complexities of young women's needs and priorities. For example, ensuring access to digital tools and platforms alone is not enough. Once young women have access, are they safe in these spaces? Do they feel like they belong and can explore new things? And are they supported by mentors along their journey to be leaders in their workplaces, or to scale their businesses?

Below are highlights of this group of young women's vision for gender equality in an inclusive digital social innovation ecosystem:

Access:

- Opportunities and resources to develop oneself and the community at large, and access to the mechanisms and platforms to influence decision-making, politics, and community action;
- Access to information about what opportunities exist, how to pursue them, and what support exists to achieve one's goals;
- Once access is available, there is need for self-confidence, passion and drive to seize opportunities because there is commitment to affecting positive change;
- Resources needed to pursue opportunities in digital innovation and technology (Financial, Digital Devices, Infrastructure, Digital Literacy);
- When women have access to opportunities, they help the family adjust to new realities and challenges;
- When women gain access, they open the doors for others to follow them.



Safety:

- Equal valuing of everyone and their rights;
- Policies and mechanisms are established throughout learning and work environments that are based on Internationally agreed minimum standards for safety, national policies, and legal frameworks and regulations that protect women against harm.
- Environment where young women and men are safe to share thoughts or feelings, and are reassured that nothing will be held against them and don't fear backlash for claiming their rights and breaking barriers;
- Institutions ensure there are structures for safety are in place including;
 - Anti Sexual harassment policies, Safeguarding Policies, Codes of Conduct,
 - Confidentiality, trusted reporting systems;
- Trust in stakeholders in the digital innovation ecosystem, and stakeholders' accountability towards the communities they work with;
- Organizational culture that creates an environment free from judgment and stereotypes, and protects against the spectrum of GBV, including physical, sexual, and psychological/emotional abuse.

Inclusion:

- Progress has been made through the Government of Rwanda's policies aligned with Rwanda's Constitution that states in its article 10 on "Fundamental Principles" that equality of all Rwandans and between men and women, and which is affirmed by women occupying at least thirty percent (30%) of positions in decision-making organs is a principle for building a State governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic Government²², has led to an important systematic and institutionalization of women inclusion in Rwanda;
- Inclusion means that people who used to be outside of certain platforms, programs, or services are brought in, and are given equal rights and benefits from participating as those who had already been in platforms, programs, or services;
- Being a decision maker at all levels - from local to national;
- Implementation of women's inclusion policies and strategies should be mainstreamed and closely monitored for compliance and mainstreaming for meaningful inclusion that will to reduce challenges like the gender digital divide;
- Working to advance gender equality works to reduce discrimination and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) - this creates a snowball effect for young women that accelerates the benefit of their participation;
- Critical that men act as champions for young women's inclusion and leadership.

²² Government of Rwanda (2015): Rwanda's Constitution of 2003 with Amendments through 2015.



It's not because they don't want to intervene in the digital ecosystem. It's because of the different factors socially and economically. ””

(Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII)

KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE DIGITAL SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

Across Rwanda, there are a range of programs and initiatives that are focussed on supporting women to bridge the gender digital divide, including gender equity programs that provide training in digital literacy and skills to young women and providing access to devices, support and mentorship for young women entrepreneurs. Through a multi-faceted approach, stakeholders in the digital innovation ecosystem are working to address the complexity of the gender digital divide by providing holistic support to young women that can enable them to “be bold and get enough opportunities to help them not to be left behind” in the digital shift. It is important to highlight these successful models to scale and deepen this impact.

However, stakeholders also highlighted that young women still struggle to access and benefit from the growing digital innovation ecosystem due to deeply rooted unequal gender norms being reinforced by negative stereotypes and attitudes among community members and the intersection of these norms with poverty and economic inequality.

The following section will highlight several of the key barriers in the ecosystem that limit access and inclusion for young women, approaches and actions being taken to address these gaps, and recommendations from stakeholders to build more inclusive digital innovation ecosystems for all youth.





THEME 1: SAFETY AND MEANINGFUL INCLUSION

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS:

Gender-Based Violence is a global phenomenon in which violence is perpetrated against someone because of their gender. This means that GBV can affect all people no matter their background or identity, and GBV is a violation of international human rights²³. GBV continues to disproportionately impact women and girls, and risks undermining global progress made towards achieving gender equality.

To combat GBV, the Government of Rwanda has taken active steps to establish safe environments for all young people through the criminalization of GBV in 2008, and the establishment of an anti-GBV policy 2011; the establishment of Isange One Stop Centres (IOSC) around the country;²⁴ Anti-GBV campaigns in the media; and Grassroots, community-based initiatives to break down stigmas around GBV and raise awareness about its warning signs.

Despite these efforts GBV remains widespread, and women and girls continue to face higher risks of GBV²⁵. According to Rwanda's Demographic and Health Survey report, 37% of women and girls (aged between 15-49) had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence, compared to 30% of men²⁶.

Institutional stakeholders and the young women researchers emphasized that for all young people, safety is a critical minimum standard for them to engage and benefit from programs to build their digital literacy and skills.

Several stakeholders highlighted their perception that young women in Rwanda can face risks of gender-based violence, including online harassment²⁷ and cyberbullying, and explained that concern over these risks could discourage young women from using digital platforms and engaging in online activities. Furthermore, while there is limited data available on rates of Technology-Facilitated GBV (TFGBV), global estimates indicate that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by TFGBV and online harassment, and stakeholders highlighted the risk of harassment or abuse posed by digital spaces. For example, one stakeholder highlighted that they felt women and girls are more likely to be the targets of internet crimes and gender-based on and offline violence, and explained that their organization addresses this increased risk to women by equipping their participants with the knowledge of "how to protect personal data and ensure privacy online and offline." (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII).

Young women researchers, and institutional stakeholders also highlighted that efforts have been made in Rwanda to address workplace sexual harassment and discrimination to improve gender equality in learning and work environments. Nonetheless, despite the impressive legal and institutional environment against gender-based (GBC) corruption, various studies indicate that this form of corruption still persists in workplaces across Rwanda and "its scale cannot be overlooked²⁸".

To address these risks, several stakeholders highlighted the importance of establishing safe mechanisms for young women to seek out opportunities to build their early careers, and to equip them with knowledge and confidence to navigate the safety risks they may encounter when looking for work, and while in the workplace. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of building accountable mechanisms for young women to report abuse, harassment, or corruption, and to work to combat stigma that keeps young people from reporting their experiences of abuse or harassment.

One stakeholder emphasized that this is necessary to encourage survivors of abuse to use systems that have been put in place, and their reports need to be followed up with action; accountability requires that “girls take care first and learn to say no and point fingers at people like that so that they are caught and punished based on the laws provided for that crime” (Institutional Stakeholder, woman, KII). This is important, because this stigma continues to limit how many survivors of abuse or harassment report their experiences; for example, Transparency International Rwanda found that among their survey sample, 39.3 percent of victims of sexual exploitation at workplaces choose to ignore it and remain silent²⁹.

²⁹Transparency International Rwanda (2022): [Gender Based Corruption at Work in Rwanda](#)



RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FROM INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Create youth-friendly and gender-sensitive environments, and provide training and raise awareness of young women’s right to be free from GBV, both offline and online, and how to speak out if they experience abuse or harassment.
2. Provide opportunities for women to be trained in women-only spaces and cohorts to establish a baseline sense of safety for their learning. E.g. One stakeholder highlighted their approach to train groups of women separately from men, and this enables them to “express themselves freely as they are with their fellow women.” (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII)
3. Provide opportunities for mixed gender cohorts to learn together, to build respect among young men and women and develop stronger peer support networks.
4. Increase the representation of women in digital technology and innovation spaces, and learning and work environments; as more women enter these spaces, this helps young women to feel safer because they are seeing other women alongside them.
5. Learn from young women about what makes them feel safe, and ensure that any safety and inclusion issues are learned from and addressed through iterative processes and allow changes to programs or approaches.
6. Link safer spaces with gender-sensitive elements that make it easier for young women, new parents, or youth with young children to engage in programming. For example, provide an inclusive environment in which young women with babies can provide care/breastfeed, and ensure that toilet facilities are clean, have locks, and have sanitary pads and pins to dispose of sanitary products.
7. Leverage local and international (GLOCAL) standards for rights, safeguarding and protection and use survivor centered and trauma informed approaches and resources to support young women to navigate and respond to safety issues in their local ecosystem.



THEME 2: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL PIPELINE

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS:

Strong political commitment has made Rwanda a world leader in terms of the representation of women in leadership and decision-making; women's representation in parliament stands at 61.3% in the Chamber of Deputies and 36% in the Senate³⁰.

At the same time, stakeholders are working to leverage this achievement in women's leadership and decision-making to promote women's leadership across STEM and digital innovation sectors, where women continue to be underrepresented.

Stakeholders and young women shared their perspectives that there is limited representation of women in STEM and digital innovation sectors, and that “their opinions are not given equal value to the opinions of men” in these spaces (Institutional stakeholder, man, KII).

For example, while there have been positive trends showing increasing numbers of women studying STEM disciplines and entering the job market in ICT sectors, men remain highly predominant in telecommunications companies in Rwanda³¹.

To promote positive role models, and increase the number of girls and young women that are pursuing STEM, innovative initiatives are being implemented

by institutional stakeholders in Rwanda to raise awareness of STEM and the profile of women in technology, including Teck Women, Ms. GEEK Rwanda, Techkobwa, and WeCode. These programs are important because the limited representation of young women in STEM has the impact of further alienating young women from these fields, as they lack role models that are leading in the digital technology and innovation sectors they can look to for inspiration. As a result, young women aren't able to build connections with peers that share their experiences, and can't see examples of what their careers could look like further along their journey.

Further, stakeholders highlighted that when women with talent and ambition in digital industries don't get the kind of follow-up support they need to move up in leadership, and “this is a huge problem because it demotivates other women because they haven't got role models in their sector that they see being rewarded for their merits and hard work”. (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII).

This lack of representation further perpetuates and widens the gender gap, as the needs and priorities of women are not championed when making decisions about the design and implementation of strategies, programs, and services to promote digital inclusion.

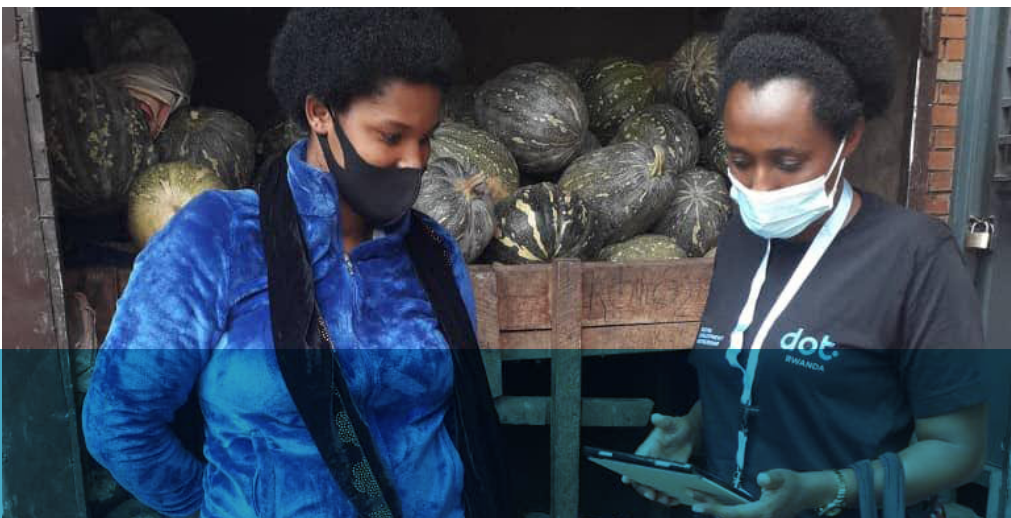
Stakeholders asserted that it is essential to ensure that women and other disregarded groups are represented in leadership and decision-making positions within the digital social innovation ecosystem, as having diverse perspectives and experiences at the table can help promote gender equality and drive innovation.

- For example, increasing the representation of young women in solutions to bridge the gender gap in digital technology and innovation improves the design and implementation of programs and services for young women. As one stakeholder described, “Identifying women’s needs in different categories and designing young women programs related to their needs. Because, young women in their communities are facing different issues based on their family, their local area, capability and support.” (Institutional stakeholder, KII).

Finally, stakeholders linked this lack of representation to discussions of safety for young women. One stakeholder shared their perspective, stating “In our country the digital world is dominated by men and the feeling of being included in a field with a lot more men than women sometimes makes some young women feel uncomfortable and unsafe and this reduces their opportunity to build digital skills.” (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII). In contrast, stakeholders noted the positive impact that having more women represented in leadership and management positions in digital innovation sectors can have, making other women feel safe because they are seeing other women in these spaces with them.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FROM INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Profile role models that young women can look up to and emulate in the technology industry, to inspire them and provide them with relevant examples. This can be achieved by highlighting successful women in the technology industry and providing opportunities for young women to build meaningful professional connections with other women who can provide mentorship and guidance that can help them to build their confidence and networks.
2. For example, Girls in ICT members, DOT Rwanda have hosted awareness campaigns and road shows including visiting schools and different communities across regions across the country to speak about the importance of STEM and ICT and how to pursue a career in these sectors.
3. Create professional networks and associations, or supporting existing associations that can meaningfully forge new supportive connections, elevate the profile of young women in STEM, and fill the barriers young women face to access supportive networks by linking them to livelihood and career building opportunities.
4. Provide emotional support and encouragement to generate motivation to take risks and try to do things, and build confidence through practical application of skills to achieve goals.
5. Create opportunities for young women to learn together alongside other women, and convene, network, and build solidarity. For example, many stakeholders emphasized how bringing young women together in the same space with other like-minded women that share their interests helps them to feel free to express themselves.





THEME 3: GENDER ROLES AND INTERNALIZED MINDSETS

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS:

Gender roles and stereotypes continue to limit the participation of young women in the digital economy. Many young women are discouraged from pursuing careers in technology or innovation, which limits their opportunities for growth and success.

Stereotypes are perpetuated that assert that young women lack the necessary knowledge and skills to be leaders in digital innovation and STEM sectors. For example, one stakeholder noted, “It is a mentality among women, particularly in the family, to not assume leadership roles in the corporate sector of the digital ecosystem, which has prevented them from being involved in it”.

Young women grow up with traditional roles and responsibilities that dictate their responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and unpaid care work, and this limits the time they have available to invest in their building their knowledge and skills, and the freedom to explore and pursue curiosity in the digital world.

Family members will establish and reinforce these traditional gender roles in relation to young women’s access to education, and young women feel pressure to live up to the expectations their parents have for them. For example, one stakeholder highlighted that “parents believe that there are some courses for men and others for women and this makes them to shape and motivate women to take courses which are less challenging...they shape

them to not follow digital and technical courses. This is a big challenge because it affects women a lot as they pursue careers which they are not passionate about simply because they want to make their parents proud.” (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII).

Deeply rooted gender norms restrict young women’s rights and autonomy, which limits their freedom to build their digital literacy and social and economic inclusion. For example, one stakeholder highlighted the link between the gender digital divide and young women’s responsibility for unpaid care work and gender norms that result in early marriage for young women, explaining “Most women are mainly engaged in unpaid care work and even when they finish their high school, they go to marriage instead of continuing their school, which actually makes young women stay behind in digital ecosystem.” (Institutional Stakeholder, woman, KII).

This also results in stereotypes about leadership, despite women’s potential as change-makers in their communities: “our community believes that all home activities (home responsibilities) which are unpaid are done by women while all decisions are taken by men. So, this makes men always leaders even though they might not be good decision makers as women.” (Institutional stakeholder, man, KII).

Stakeholders described how community attitudes and mindsets dictate that digital businesses and jobs are for men; this limits young women's confidence and motivation in STEM disciplines, and creates barriers for them to access digital skills training programs and skills building opportunities because they feel they do not belong in these spaces. Several stakeholders noted how the internalization of these stereotypes leads women to defer to men and seek their help when it comes to digital technology, whether in classrooms or in work environments. In turn, this widens the digital skills gap because as digital technology evolves, this exacerbates the barriers they face to catching up with the digital literacy needed to leverage digital technology.

Rigid gender stereotypes that are reinforced throughout girls' and boys' lives have led to the myth that men are better suited to digital technology and STEM sectors, and the widespread perception that men are "the most informed experts in digital skills" is reinforced by these stereotypes as girls and boys move through their education.

Young women are limited by their lack of confidence and fear of taking risks, and this limits their curiosity and motivation to explore new areas of knowledge and develop new skills in the digital world. Instead, young women limit themselves to safer and more familiar technologies rather than leveraging new digital tools



“ Women grow up with a lot of responsibilities and it becomes difficult for them to be able to manage their home’s responsibilities and businesses and by being busy fulfilling all of that they don’t get enough time to strengthen their digital and leadership skills. ”

(Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII)

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FROM INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Engage men as gender equality champions by fostering gender equality and gender rights among boys to shape them into allies to women instead of threats. Engage men as allies in this shared goal to minimize harm to young women as they navigate changing gender roles. For example, one stakeholder highlighted how men often perceive programs to promote gender equality, stating “we need to first convince the boys and men about gender equity and what it aims to do because most of them think that they came to destroy men and deprive them of their rights/dignity due to the fact that there are women who went there pretending that they have a law to protect them and make them neglect their responsibilities and instead disrespect their husbands...there are others who have learned from it...they get together, consult with each other, and all their projects progress because cooperation accelerates the development and happiness of the community because they don’t bring yelling”. (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII)
2. Provide training to young men on gender equality and emphasize the role that all people have to play in creating an inclusive digital innovation ecosystem. For example, stakeholders implement programs that support young men and women to build healthy roles in the family, and capacity building activities (Bandeberaho, and Indashyikirwa) to engage men in learning and discussion around how they can support gender equality and why it is important.
3. Cultivate passion among young women for STEM topics and skills, and support them to follow these passions when pursuing their education, ongoing learning, and livelihood opportunities.
4. Provide mentorship that strengthens young women’s confidence and self-efficacy to enable them to be confident drivers of their career journey.



THEME 4: ACCESS TO RESOURCES, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS:

Rwanda has achieved nearly universal coverage across the country to mobile and internet networks; Currently, on average 2G and 3G geographical coverage is at 90 per cent while the population coverage is 92.6 per cent, and the 4G internet covers 95.2 per cent of the geography and reaches 97.2 per cent of the population. Meanwhile, due to barriers to update and use of the internet, internet penetration is at 58.3 per cent with only 16 per cent of the population using 3G and 4G³².

GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022 indicates lack of affordability as the top barrier to mobile ownership and mobile internet use across Africa³³. The barriers of lack of affordability are increased for young women living in rural communities, who cannot afford to own their own digital devices, such as smartphones, laptops, and internet services. For example, in Rwanda 76% of women living in urban areas own smartphones compared to 41% of women living in rural areas³⁴. One stakeholder described how they encounter access issues in their work in rural communities with limited resources, stating, "in some regions there are still barriers of poor infrastructure such as electricity and they use solar energy which can't charge their computers and smartphones, and internet [connectivity] issues." (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII). This stakeholder noted how important it is to collaborate with local leaders to build on existing efforts to find solutions to make digital

technology and devices more affordable and accessible. For example, led by MTN Rwanda and run in partnership with the Ministry of ICT and Innovation, the Connect Rwanda campaign targets vulnerable households who can receive phones donated by various organizations in the country³⁵.

Further, this lack of access to devices limits young women's ability to build skills and experience with digital tools and platforms, and to participate meaningfully in the digital economy. For example, one stakeholder noted that their lack of access to digital devices to practice their new knowledge and skills "makes them immediately forget what they have learned in a short time and after the training they have no use for the knowledge they have been given." (Institutional stakeholder, man, KII).

Further, stakeholders highlighted how poverty reinforces young women's lack of access to resources to pursue digitally-enabled entrepreneurship, and that connecting young women to opportunities to access funding and resources is critical to ensure their inclusion in the digital economy. (Institutional stakeholder, woman, KII). Many stakeholders noted that through their work they provide services free of cost, or provide stipends or financial aid for young women to be able to access learning opportunities and to overcome the financial barriers they face.



RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FROM INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Facilitate access to funding for young women, to be able to access digital literacy and skills learning opportunities, and/or to start or run digitally enabled enterprises.
2. Scale up existing and create new programs, strategies, and policies that ensure access to affordable smartphones, and build support services for people, especially young women, to access devices, airtime, and data services.
3. Provide equitable access to opportunities in the digital innovation ecosystem for the most underserved young people, especially young women in rural areas that have limited access to digital devices, to ensure that all young women have a chance to develop their skills and pursue careers in technology.
4. Continue to strengthen support for young women to have access to trade information, business development services, mentorship, marketing and communication support, capacity strengthening opportunities, and access to finance to support their entrepreneurship.
5. Facilitate and support young women's autonomy over their devices.
6. Provide linkages for young women to income generating opportunities in the digital economy that are well-paying and establish wage equality, and are safe and dignified, to combat segregation of women into low-paying informal roles and sectors.

DOT RWANDA D2S GENDER EQUALITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

Checklist of Recommendations for Supporting Safety of Young Women

- Create youth-friendly and gender-sensitive environments, and provide training and raise awareness of young women's right to be free from GBV, both offline and online, and how to speak out if they experience abuse or harassment.
- Provide opportunities for women to be trained in women-only spaces and cohorts to establish a baseline sense of safety for their learning.
- Provide opportunities for mixed gender cohorts to learn together, to build respect among young men and women and develop stronger peer support networks.
- Increase the representation of women in digital technology and innovation spaces, and learning and work environments; as more women enter these spaces, this helps young women to feel safer because they are seeing other women alongside them.
- Learn from young women about what makes them feel safe, and ensure that any safety and inclusion issues are learned from and addressed through iterative processes and allow changes to programs or approaches
- Link safer spaces with gender-sensitive elements that make it easier for young women, new parents, or youth with young children to engage in programming. For example, provide an inclusive environment in which young women with babies can provide care/breastfeed, and ensure that toilet facilities are clean, have locks, and have sanitary pads and pins to dispose of sanitary products.
- Leverage local and international (GLOCAL) standards for rights, safeguarding and protection and use survivor centered and trauma informed approaches and resources to support young women to navigate and respond to safety issues in their local ecosystem

DOT RWANDA D2S GENDER EQUALITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

Checklist of Recommendations for Increasing Women's Representation in the Digital Pipeline

- Profile role models that young women can look up to and emulate in the technology industry, to inspire them and provide them with relevant examples. This can be achieved by highlighting successful women in the technology industry and providing opportunities for young women to build meaningful professional connections with other women who can provide mentorship and guidance that can help them to build their confidence and networks. For example, Girls in ICT members, DOT Rwanda have hosted awareness campaigns and road shows including visiting schools and different communities across regions across the country to speak about the importance of STEM and ICT and how to pursue a career in these sectors.

- Create professional networks and associations, or supporting existing associations that can meaningfully forge new supportive connections, elevate the profile of young women in STEM, and fill the barriers young women face to access supportive networks by linking them to livelihood and career building opportunities.

- Provide emotional support and encouragement to generate motivation to take risks and try to do things, and build confidence through practical application of skills to achieve goals.

- Create opportunities for young women to learn together alongside other women, and convene, network, and build solidarity. Many stakeholders emphasized how bringing young women together in the same space with other like-minded women that share their interests helps them to feel free to express themselves.



DOT RWANDA D2S GENDER EQUALITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

Checklist of Recommendations for Managing Gender Norms and Internalized Mindsets

- Engage men as gender equality champions by fostering gender equality and gender rights among boys to shape them into allies to women instead of threats. Engage men as allies in this shared goal to minimize harm to young women as they navigate changing gender roles.
- Provide opportunities for women to be trained in women-only spaces and cohorts to establish a baseline sense of safety for their learning.
- Provide training to young men on gender equality and emphasize the role that all people have to play in creating an inclusive digital innovation ecosystem. For example, stakeholders implement programs that support young men and women to build healthy roles in the family, and capacity building activities (Bandeberaho, and Indashyikirwa) to engage men in learning and discussion around how they can support gender equality and why it is important.
- Cultivate passion among young women for STEM topics and skills, and support them to follow these passions when pursuing their education, ongoing learning, and livelihood opportunities.
- Provide mentorship that strengthens young women's confidence and self-efficacy to enable them to be confident drivers of their career journey.



DOT RWANDA D2S GENDER EQUALITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

Checklist of Recommendations for Facilitating Access to Resources in the Context of Poverty

- Facilitate access to funding for young women, to be able to access digital literacy and skills learning opportunities, and/or to start or run digitally enabled enterprises.
- Scale up existing and create new programs, strategies, and policies that ensure access to affordable smartphones, and build support services for people, especially young women, to access devices, airtime, and data services.
- Provide equitable access to opportunities in the digital innovation ecosystem for the most underserved young people, especially young women in rural areas that have limited access to digital devices, to ensure that all young women have a chance to develop their skills and pursue careers in technology.
- Continue to strengthen support for young women to have access to trade information, business development services, mentorship, marketing and communication support, capacity strengthening opportunities, and access to finance to support their entrepreneurship.
- Facilitate and support young women's autonomy over their devices.
- Provide linkages for young women to income generating opportunities in the digital economy that are well-paying and establish wage equality, and are safe and dignified, to combat segregation of women into low-paying informal roles and sectors.

MEET OUR YOUTH RESEARCHERS

A fantastic group of 8 community-based researchers collaborated in participatory action research workshops and led key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community stakeholders. Without their leadership, the findings presented in this report would not have been possible.



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