The Pacific digital transformation: is everyone a winner?

Photo Credit: Asian Development Bank/Flickr

by Sarah Boxall

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Digital transformation – based on improvements to digital connectivity and expanded internet access – offers a substantial opportunity for Pacific private sector development. According to the World Bank, Pacific digital transformation could add more than US$5 billion to regional GDP, increase total government revenue across the region by US$1 billion, and create almost 300,000 new jobs in the region's ICT sector by 2040. The digital transformation will increase access to markets, information, government services, and finance and banking services.

Yet little attention has been given to the Pacific's digital gender divide – the differences between Pacific men and women in digital technology access and use.

At the global level, the International Telecommunication Union has found that the digital gender divide is closing, with 62% of men and 57% of women now using the internet (although the gap is greatest in least developed countries, where the proportion of women using the internet is 12 percentage points lower than men). The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022 also states that the mobile internet gender gap is reducing, but notes there are still 264 million fewer women than men with access.

However, global reports and indices rarely include data for the Pacific. So how does the Pacific compare with global trends? Are women across the Pacific positioned to benefit equally from the economic gains to be delivered through digital connectivity in the region?

To answer this question, we need reliable data and analysis on the differences in digital opportunity and access between men and women, so that we can identify and address gaps. However, there is limited information and analysis on the gendered impact and opportunities presented by digital transformation in the Pacific.

To bridge the data shortfall, the Asian Development Bank's Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI), in partnership with the World Wide Web Foundation and local partners (the PNG Digital ICT Cluster, Samoa Information Technology

Association, and Tonga Women in ICT Incorporated), used the Women's Rights Online global methodology to measure the digital gender gap.

The methodology is based on 14 indicators that are used to measure country progress towards closing the digital gender gap. The scorecard uses existing secondary data, where available, and identifies evidence gaps where data on women and ICT is missing or not publicly available.

Digital gender gap audits were conducted in three countries with varied rates of internet penetration – Papua New Guinea (11.2%), Samoa (33.61%), and Tonga (41.25%). Scorecards were produced for each country, to measure the state of women's digital inclusion and empowerment across five key themes: internet access translating into women's empowerment, affordability, digital skills and education, relevant content and services for women, and online safety. The scorecards also assessed the policy environment and efforts to collect sex-disaggregated data.

Given the low rate of internet penetration, PNG scored the lowest of the three countries across all five themes, with an overall score of 47%. Samoa and Tonga performed better across the key areas, with overall scores of 71% and 71.6% respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of scorecards for PNG, Samoa, and Tonga (scores out of 10)

Country	Relevant content and services	Overall score (%)	Internet access and women's empowerment	Affordability	Digital skills and education
PNG	5	47	4	4	3
Samoa	7	71	7	7	8
Tonga	6	72	7	8	8

Source: Pacific digital gender scorecards: regional synthesis report • Created with Datawrapper

The audits and findings are explained in more detail in the regional synthesis report. The report notes that the Pacific has the lowest rate of mobile internet penetration in the world (18%).

Tonga was the only country to collect and report sex-disaggregated ICT data, and

none of the three countries had clear, time-bound targets to address divides in internet use in national ICT policies.

The implications are clear – if women are less likely to have internet access, they are less likely to access online information and services. The internet is less affordable for women due to lower levels of workforce participation, the gender pay gap, and lower levels of digital literacy. As a result, many women will not be able to take advantage of the new platforms and services that could open opportunities for improved economic and social outcomes.

In recognition of these opportunities, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) has devised a regional e-commerce strategy and roadmap, followed by the development of national e-commerce strategies for Samoa and Tonga. E-commerce readiness assessments that informed these strategies include very limited sex-disaggregated data or gender analysis, despite covering many of the same themes as the scorecards, such as access, affordability and digital skills. It is thus no surprise that these strategies include commitments to empower women through e-commerce, but lack specific activities or targets for reaching women, apart from building digital skills for women entrepreneurs.

Expanding access and use of digital technology has significant potential for women's entrepreneurship in the Pacific, including for women in the informal sector. But without focused interventions that target women's participation, based on reliable sex-disaggregated data, many Pacific Island women will be left behind as the digital economy grows and others capitalise on its benefits.

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