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USAID WomenConnect Challenge

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE



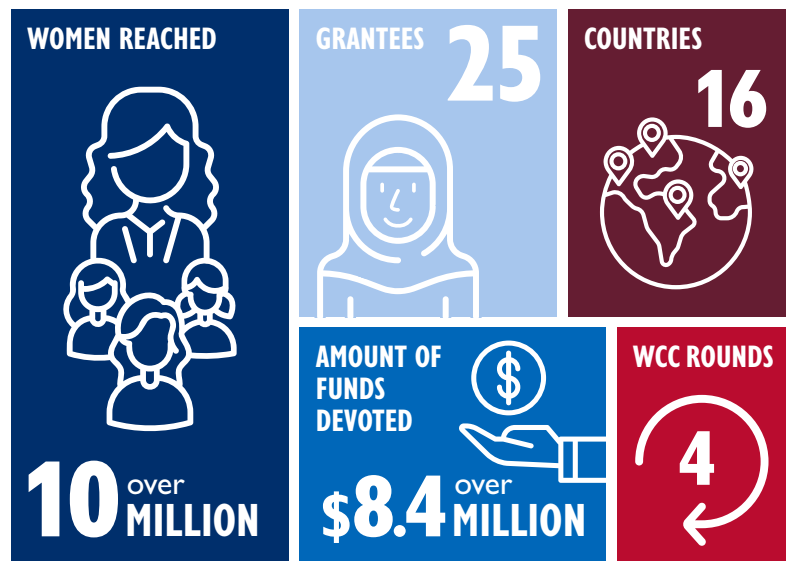
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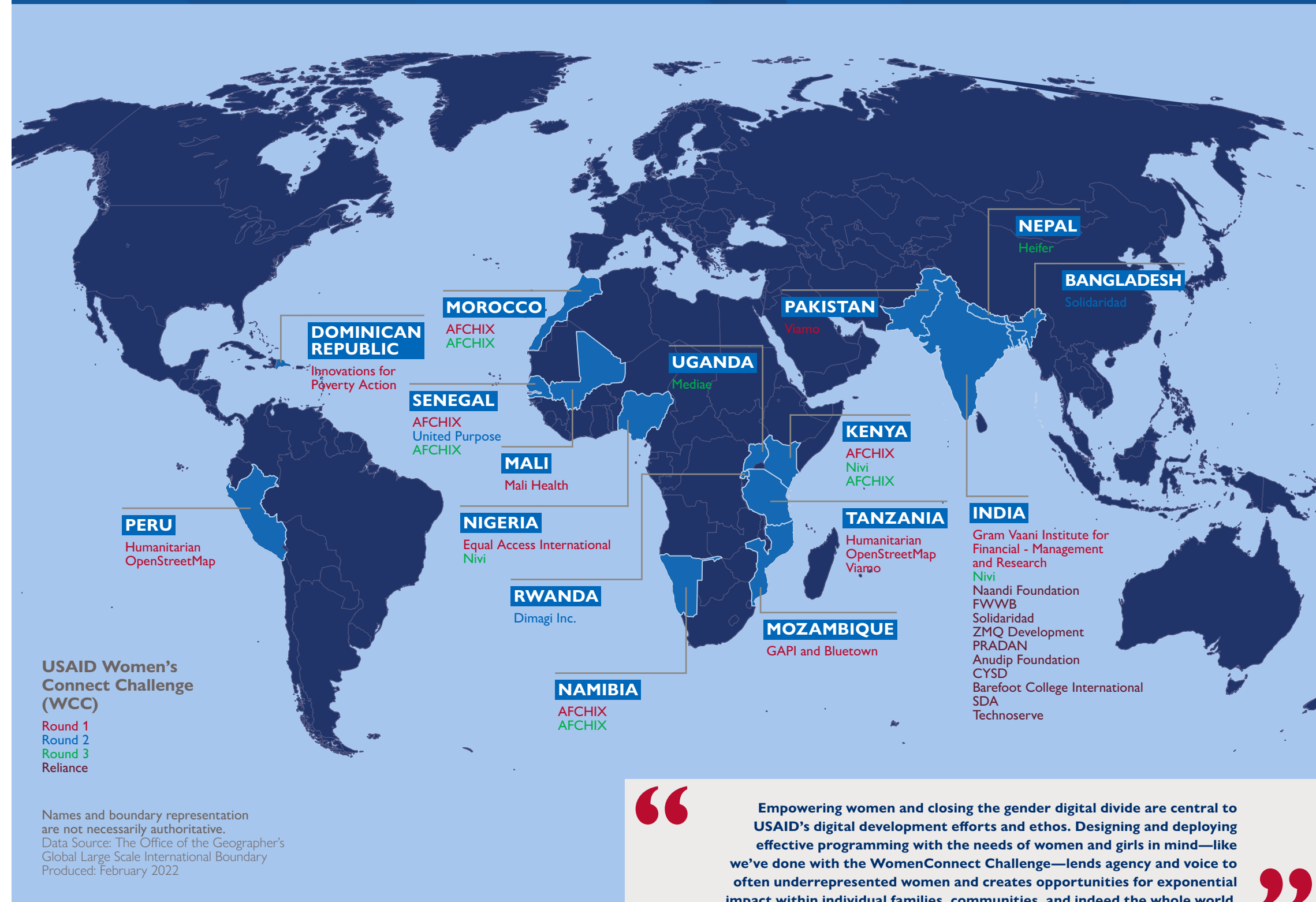
What is the WomenConnect Challenge?

The WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) is USAID’s global call for solutions to improve women’s participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the ways women access and use technology. While Internet use and mobile phone ownership are on the rise across the world, the gap between men and women’s adoption of these technologies continues to grow. This disparity—called the gender digital divide—further entrenches gender inequality and oppression, as social and economic engagement on digital platforms have become pivotal components of everyday life and work. The potential transformative impact of digital technology will only result in long-term economic growth and social change if digital technology reaches women, particularly low-income women, who are critical to successful and sustainable development.

The USAID WomenConnect Challenge was created in 2018 to inspire, uncover, and develop effective, culturally appropriate interventions that target the root causes of the gender digital divide. Early rounds of WCC funded a number of small-scale projects to determine the effectiveness of various approaches, and later rounds focused on bringing these proven solutions to scale in concert with private sector actors.



WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) Locations



“ Empowering women and closing the gender digital divide are central to USAID’s digital development efforts and ethos. Designing and deploying effective programming with the needs of women and girls in mind—like we’ve done with the WomenConnect Challenge—lends agency and voice to often underrepresented women and creates opportunities for exponential impact within individual families, communities, and indeed the whole world. ”

– Christopher Burns, Chief Digital Development Officer, USAID



2018

WomenConnect Round One awarded nine small grants

2019

WomenConnect Round Two awarded three large grants

2020

WomenConnect Round Three awarded four large grants

2021

USAID/Rliance Foundation WomenConnect Challenge India awarded 10 grants



Source: Equal Access International

Round One

The inaugural WCC round focused on efforts to address the social and cultural norms that keep women offline and under-empowered, limiting their ability to access social and economic opportunities. In its evaluation of potential awardees, WCC emphasized the need for local solutions to bridge the gender digital divide and expressed interest in interventions that could be scaled and replicated in other communities.

SPOTLIGHT: Millions of Nigerian women are prohibited from using the Internet or smartphones due to widely held beliefs that women’s use of digital technologies is immoral, inappropriate, or unnecessary. As a part of its #Tech4Families program, WCC grantee Equal Access International produced a 12-episode show for a popular Nigerian radio station to help break down gender stereotypes, challenge cultural taboos, and promote digital skills and opportunities for women and girls. After each episode, #Tech4Families facilitators led discussions with families, underscoring key messaging and helping to dispel harmful misperceptions about women’s Internet and smartphone use.

“ I initially thought women were weak compared to men when it comes to many things, but I don’t have that perception anymore... After some [#Tech4Families] sessions, when we go back home with my children, we used to say things like ‘how can a woman benefit from the use of Internet? I think it will only lead to her downfall’... We eventually got to understand that that way of thinking is a setback. So, my perception has changed as a result of participating in this program. In fact, I can now allow my daughter to go to the Internet café. ”
– Mother, #Tech4Families participant



Source: Solidaridad

Round Two

Round Two of WCC was designed to focus primarily on women’s economic advancement and selected grantees with demonstrated ability to innovate around income generation and diversification, access to credit and banking services, and financial literacy. When women are economically empowered, they invest back into their families and communities, producing a multiplier effect that spurs growth and stability.

SPOTLIGHT: Solidaridad links women dairy farmers in Bangladesh to formal supply chains and delivers critical information about competitive market prices, financial literacy, and modern dairy practices. In this project, women have the opportunity to enroll in a mobile money program that provides training in financial and dairy-farming best practices. Solidaridad developed a digital application called the i2i app that collects data from milk collection centers and links to the mobile wallets of women farmers so that women are able to directly and conveniently receive income, reducing instances of fraud or exploitation.

“ Currently I am the engineer supporting the Lanet Umoja Community Network and also the leader of the Youth Engineers in Lanet Umoja Community Network... The network engineers training format has a working feel that allows even the least experienced networkers to understand and shine... The community network has undoubtedly facilitated a steady growth in my networking skills and also allowed especially the youth to fulfill their goals by [helping] people to start businesses. ”
– Network Administrator, Lanet Umoja Community Network



Source: AFCHIX

Round Three

In Round Three of the WCC, four awards were made—and matched with funding from the private sector—to continue advancing women’s digital development around the world. This round focuses on scale, replicability, and private sector partnership and investment to support emerging technologies and policies.

SPOTLIGHT: AFCHIX, a grantee of both WCC Round One and Round Three, creates entrepreneurial opportunities for rural women in Senegal, Morocco, Kenya, and Namibia to run local Internet service providers and work as network engineers. This initiative contributes to improving connectivity and building the capacity of communities to establish and maintain telecommunications infrastructure. The entrepreneurial and empowerment program helps women establish their own companies, provide important community services, and position themselves as role models.

“ My life has changed with the inclusion of digital services – the ability to receive updates about the money owed to me every week and my mobile wallet! I can now save my money through agent banking as well. The digital inclusion project has saved me from the adversity of the pandemic, as we could get information through the [Interactive Voice Response feature] and continue with the sales of milk. I have gained confidence to continue and grow with my dairy farm. ”
– Dairy Farmer, Khulna, Bangladesh



Source: Centre for Youth and Social Development



USAID & Reliance Foundation WomenConnect Challenge India

USAID and Reliance Foundation created the USAID and Reliance Foundation WomenConnect Challenge India in 2020 to help bridge the gender digital divide across the subcontinent. In partnership with Reliance Foundation, an affiliate of Reliance Industries Limited, the largest publicly traded company in India, this fourth and only country-specific round of the WCC focuses on India's large gender and technology gap. Ten awardees were chosen in 2021 to apply local, culturally contextual, and innovative solutions to closing the gender digital divide. The awardees also participated in a [Community of Practice](#) to support and showcase their work while creating a space for all organizations involved in digital inclusion to collaborate and build momentum to close this gap for good.



Source: Equal Access International

“ When women rise, families flourish, communities grow, and countries prosper. A truly developed world has to be an equal world. ”
— Nita M. Ambani, Founder and Chairperson, Reliance Foundation

WOMENCONNECT CHALLENGE — A LEGACY

Women's digital empowerment is key to sustainable development. By putting women's needs at the center of meaningful connectivity and designing programs with their information needs, aspirations, and barriers in mind, we can help close the gender digital divide. We also have the opportunity to develop a sustainable user base and female technical workforce, demonstrating the potential of technology to change lives and communities. Reaching the 1 billion women who currently do not have access to the mobile Internet is a tall order and requires that countries, donors, technology partners, and policymakers make a concerted effort to apply these proven strategies.

“ This project offers us not only the possibility of staying at home and connecting but also a place for training. We also had huge problems in selling our products, but today this project makes our products visible all over the world. ”
— AFCHIX Association Member

PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Through close partnership with local awardee teams and community members and after thorough evaluation of grantee activities, successes, and challenges, WCC identified five proven strategies for closing the gender digital divide and increasing women's empowerment.



Change Social Norms and Cultural Perceptions — In many poor or rural communities, women's access to technology and the Internet is often seen as immoral, inappropriate, or unnecessary. It is important to work on perceptions with those in positions of power, such as men, community and religious leaders, and elders. Addressing these existing social and cultural norms will help women gain access to information and opportunities, build confidence, and become more empowered.



Create Economic Opportunities — When trained on the use of technology, women can access increased economic opportunities, from serving as community technology leaders to becoming entrepreneurs. Once men are educated about online employment opportunities for women, they often become supportive of technology access due to the increased family income. In turn, a woman's financial gains allow her to have more liberty and the ability to afford additional Internet access—educating and empowering her further.



Cultivate Women's Confidence — In many developing countries, ingrained traditional gender roles lead women and men to believe that women are unable or not smart enough to use technology, enforcing a gender digital divide and continued lack of confidence. Targeted programs have helped women increase self-efficacy and have demonstrated that women are able to effectively utilize technology, understand the risks and opportunities of using technology, and position themselves as role models in their communities.



Design Creative Women-Centric Technology — To close the gender digital divide, programs must use technology options tailored to women in developing countries, many of whom are illiterate or have low literacy levels. Innovative video and audio platforms allow women to readily communicate and learn. Offline content on a range of development topics can reach women who do not otherwise have access to the internet. Custom devices and services can meet women's needs and help close the gender and technology gap.



Develop Community Support — As poor or rural women gain access to technology, many become advocates for change in their communities. When given a platform to communicate with local leaders, they have championed issues disproportionately affecting women, such as gender-based violence and access to finance or government programs, which benefits the whole community and leads to wider acceptance of women's technology use.

“ Before I attended this program, I thought I couldn't use the Internet at home to do my assignments, because I lacked the confidence of using it the right way or answering the questions correctly. I thought that could only be done at the Internet café, but now I do everything on my own and even help others that don't have a phone. My independence means everything. ”
— Daughter, #Tech4Families participant

“ The experience of the IVR (Interactive Voice Response) System is just a miracle for me. I got text messages and voice messages regarding different issues of modern dairy good practices. The missed call service through the IVR system allows me as well as other women farmers to learn about different dairy farming aspects at any time of the day. ”
— Dairy farmer with Solidaridad, Bangladesh

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