

Engendering the Digital Economy: Reflections from Women Market Vendors in Uganda

The theme for this year's International Women's Day as appropriately chosen by the United Nations, was "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality."

This takes into account why technological innovations are increasingly being recognized as a precondition by civil society organisations, governments, the academia and private sector to accelerate the attainment of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 on 'gender equality and women's empowerment.'

From e-commerce ventures that facilitate entrepreneurship to e-governance and e-learning platforms that take classrooms to individuals, technological innovations have proved over time to have the potential to serve as powerful tools that break trends and increase awareness, access and availability of opportunities especially for previously marginalized groups.

However, history shows that such innovation does not certainly and automatically benefit all alike. For example, of the estimated 2.7 billion people currently unconnected to the internet globally, the majority are women and girls. Unfortunately, this gap is continuously expanding, especially in developing countries, creating a pertinent need to support digital gender equality interventions (International Telecommunication Union, 2022).

In African countries such as Uganda, the digital divide is evidenced by findings of numerous studies, including a survey conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation in October 2020 with the country having by far the largest gender gap in the



According to Emily Andiru, digital technologies such as smart phones help improve collaboration, ease communication and enhance responsiveness amongst women market vendors.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the widest gender gaps in mobile internet use in the world, with over 190 million women not using mobile internet services (a 37% gender gap).

continent, with 27% of men using internet compared to 19% of women.

This exclusion of women is a huge threat to progress on gender equality and denies women opportunities to improve their lives, as the same survey warns:

"The internet is one of the most empowering technologies the world has ever seen. But unless women are equally able to benefit from it, it will deepen already existing inequalities."

A number of barriers are at the root of this gender-based digital exclusion in Uganda and the African continent as whole, including the high cost of digital technologies such as mobile internet, smart phones and computers, the lack of technological literacy, and inherent gender biases and social-cultural norms.

Bridging the digital gender divide

In recognition of the above challenges, the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA Network) has since 2021, been implementing a number of interventions dedicated to aid women market vendors and grassroots women rights organizations in countries like Uganda to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a tool to address gender inequalities and attain economic empowerment.

For example, the organization distributed smart phones to leaders of the women market vendor cooperatives in Arua district to improve their access to untapped online marketplaces, digital financial platforms, business related information, e-learning platforms as well as psychosocial support and legal aid services especially during the COVID19 lockdown.

Additionally, SIHA Network has conducted a series of digital literacy and security training workshops that have equipped and familiarized the women market vendors and women rights organizations with skills and knowledge required to defend themselves against cybercrimes such as online bullying, harassment, and stalking; and to make smart online security decisions that protect them as well as their businesses and organizations.

Lessened operational costs

Juliet Lenia Wadiko has for the last 5 years been selling agricultural products such as tomatoes, onions and cabbages at Dadum Market in Arua. She also doubles as the Chairperson of Dadamu Women Market Vendors Association.

Like most of the women vendors, Juliet could not make ends meet before she received a smart phone from SIHA Network to boost her business.

"The expenditures on rent and transport were very high and I hardly saved any money to cater for basic needs like food, rent and scholastic materials for my family. Having to hawk the items was also not an easy option either. But things changed when I received the smartphone and basic training on how to use it to enhance my business. Today, I engage with service providers and customers in the comfort of my home, thereby saving

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"DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality".

on operational costs. I also optimize online platforms like WhatsApp to share information about my products and reach a broad client audience," she shares.

Increased customer base

Jane Akwero, the Chairperson of Driwala United Women Market Vendors Cooperative in the same City is another woman market vendor that has experienced first-hand the advantages of leveraging digital technologies to grow her business.

At the age of 34 years, she started selling secondhand clothes and foodstuffs to become financially independent. Before participating in SIHA Network's digital literacy and security training and receiving a smart phone, she used to travel very long distances to access supplies. Access to market information or any other assistance from the business community was equally impossible and this limited Akwero's entry to commercial opportunities.

What she appreciates most about the technological training and devices provided by SIHA Network is that they have allowed her to better promote her products and engage with clients and service providers from afar.

"This experience has encouraged me to become an advocate for the empowerment of women market vendors through digital innovations," she states proudly.

Enhanced cross border trade engagement

For **Sharon Tiiko**, the Secretary of Arua Main Market Okusi Women Market Vendor Group, the smart phones have been a turning point in as far as enabling women market vendors to engage in cross border trade is concerned.

"The phones have enabled us to stimulate and expand our entrepreneurial activity to the Democratic Republic of Congo which borders Arua district on the west. Procedures can be completed with significantly less or no physical contact. Previously, this was not possible, and we were hesitant to engage in cross border trade because of the cumbersome and lengthy import, export and transit measures involved."

Improved business communication

From **Viola Anguko's** experience (the Chairperson of Ediofe Women Market Vendors Cooperative Savings and Credit Society Ltd) the smart phones have supported women market vendors to not only enlarge their financial resources, as well as business networks and connections, but also improved access peer support, encouragement, and motivation.

Emily Andiru, the Chairperson of Onzivu Women Market Vendors attests

to this.

"There is better collaboration, eased communication and enhanced responsiveness across the board."

Enhanced capacity to advocate for women & girls' rights

Similarly, the internet-enabled devices have also supported the women market vendors to not only raise issues related to poor garbage disposal, deprived hygiene within the markets, but also report incidences of violence to local and city leaders.

"We have online communities where we discuss issues affecting us. These can range from poor working conditions to domestic violence incidences that happen in our communities. If the issue at hand requires immediate action, we communicate directly with the victims. We also offer referrals to women and girls affected by violence or in distress on issues like medical and legal aid, as well as psychosocial support and temporary shelter," shares **Doris Draluru**, the secretary of Lobida Bazaar Women's Market Cooperative Society Ltd.

Recommendations for action

While the women market vendors and women's rights organizations that have benefited from SIHA's digital and technological interventions ooze with satisfaction in what they have gained in terms of skills, knowledge and personal and business achievements, Uganda and the Greater of Horn Africa region as a whole is still grappling with the digital gender divide, yet the cost of inaction is high. This coupled with other issues such as the lethargic economic growth, makes the case for digital gender equality an urgent priority.

This calls for a multifaceted approach, necessitating collaboration among governments, businesses and civil society.

According to **Ms. Hala El-Karib**, the Regional Director of SIHA Network, breaking technological barriers, especially for women entrepreneurs, will unlock the potential of the digital economy in the region and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Ms. Rehema Minala, the Legal Officer at the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA Uganda) in Arua District, cannot agree more.

"While we would love to see more women embracing ICTs to address gender inequalities including report incidences of violence, it not possible because majority of the victims do not own or have access to these technologies due to the high costs. However, solving women's in-access will ensure social and economic growth for all," she adds.

Latest statistics from UN Women's Gender Snapshot 2022 report show that women's exclusion from the digital world has shaved \$1 trillion from the gross domestic product of low- and middle-income countries in the last decade—a loss that will grow to \$1.5 trillion by 2025 without action.



With support from SIHA Network, market vendors such as Doris Draluru have not only been able to use digital technologies to boost their business, but also enlarge their networks and connections.



"The technological training and devices provided by SIHA Network have enabled me to engage with clients and service providers from afar," shares Jane Akwero, the Chairperson of Driwala United Women Market Vendors Cooperative in Arua.

All hope is not lost though as communicated by **Mr. John Odabo**, the Government Senior IT Officer in Arua.

"Most African states, including the government of Uganda have already put in place information management systems such as the Integrated Revenue Administration System that help the business community to easily meet their tax obligations with ease. What we have not done, however, is come up with innovations that specifically address women's concerns. This is something we plan to give due consideration moving forward."

To accelerate action when it comes to putting women and girls at the centre of technological innovation in the GHOA, SIHA Network recommends that state and non-state actors:

- Enhance access to and improve the affordability of digital technologies in line with global and national targets whilst paying special attention to women in rural areas to foster a more inclusive digital region.
- Digital literacy: equip women and girls with skills required to participate and thrive in digital transformation and sensitize the rest of the public

against socio-cultural norms that discriminate against women and their use of technological innovations.

- Prevent, mitigate and respond to threats that arise from ICTs and address inequalities that hinder girls and women from fully participating in and benefiting from the information society; this includes developing comprehensive approaches around ethics, privacy, security and forms of cyber-related violence that pose significant risks for girls and women.
- Foster women's engagement in the technology sector, including positions of leadership and decision-making by increasing private and public investments for and removal of gender barriers to ICT education and training for women and girls.
- Integrate a gender perspective in ICT regional, national and sub-national related strategies, policies, plans, and budgets.
- Raise awareness around the political value of technology to shift the dominance of gendered, corporate, state and northern ownership in internet governance structures in the region.