# Plan International, Inc.

# Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child for General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment

# May 2019

# Introduction

Plan International, Inc. is an independent development and humanitarian organisation founded in 1937 that advances children’s rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world that advances children’s rights and equality for girls.

Plan International welcomes the call for input published by Committee on the Rights of the Child for its upcoming General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment. Plan International strives to build a world in which girls have the tools and the power to shape their own futures and influence decision making and policy processes at local and global levels.

This submission examines the evidence on girls’ digital empowerment, and argues that promoting girls’ digital literacy and closing the digital gender gap will play an important role in achieving gender equality and ensuring that no child is left behind. Indeed, bridging the digital gender divide is essential in ensuring girls are not left behind in an increasingly digital future. The submission also argues that actions promoting girls’ digital empowerment should be guided by the principle of engaging girls as active, capable partners, not merely passive recipients or targets. Rather than making assumptions about what girls want and need from technology, it is instead important to work together with girls on strengthening and developing their use and production of technology and digital tools.

## Empowerment through technology

Technology is not a prerequisite for being a change agent or a leader, but it can be a powerful tool for girls’ voices to become even louder and reach further. Stories of girls taking control over their own futures and lives can be spread and used as a catalyst for more action, and mediums such as online maps, video and podcasts can be effective tools for influencing citizens and decision makers. Online spaces and digital tools allow women and girls to organize more efficiently and galvanize global action for common causes, such as fighting against harmful gender stereotypes or standing up against gender-based violence. Providing girls with training on how to effectively take advantage of social media and digital tools for activism, awareness raising and campaigning while also teaching girls about issues concerning safety can enable more girls to become agents of change and leaders in their communities.

Today, the role of media – and especially social media – is also increasingly important for shaping young people’s attitudes, worldviews and values. The media’s’ portrayal of women and girls has a subconscious effect on how young people grow up to see themselves, and can shape the gender structures and power dimensions in societies.[[1]](#endnote-1) Ensuring that the media portrays stories and images of women and girls who are leading change and taking control over their own lives and futures is crucial not only for the empowerment of girls, but for shaping the way boys and men see the role and importance of girls and women in societies. To achieve this goal, it is also crucial to ensure that women and girls aren’t only present as the subjects of media stories, but as the producers of them as well. This can be achieved through promoting girls’ access to and participation in creating content for media, as well as including them in the design of measures to make digital environments safe.

## The gender digital divide

Despite the accumulated efforts and commitments of the past 20 years, today’s girls continue to face gender-based barriers that prevent them from accessing and utilising technology and digital tools at the same level as boys. Not only does the digital gender gap still exist, in some instances it has even grown wider in recent years.

The digital environment is a highly gendered space at all levels:

* Content: Not only does the internet contain less relevant content for girls and women, oftentimes content contains explicit bias.
* Girls’ and women’s experience while online: Overall, the web is a hostile space for women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by online harassment, abuse, and violence.
* Creation and governance. Girls and women are a minority in these spaces, which may be a reason for why gender-based violence online has been allowed to grow.

Digital technologies have a strong potential to empower girls and women economically and socially.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet girls and women are, on average, 14% less likely than men to own a mobile phone than men worldwide. When girls and women do own mobile phones, they are less likely to use mobile data, social media apps or SMS services compared to men.[[3]](#endnote-3) There is also a stark disparity in access to the Internet. In 2016, the Internet gender gap was 12% worldwide, and 31% in least developed countries.[[4]](#endnote-4) This gender gap in access to digital technology limits the ability of girls and women to benefit from many innovations of the digital economy, such as digital payments and mobile money. Girls also feel safer and more connected when they have a mobile phone, and they use mobile phones to save time and money and access education opportunities.

There is also a significant gender divide in terms of career and academic aspirations related to information and communication technologies (ICTs). In OECD countries, only 5% of girls expect a career in computing or engineering, while 18% of boys expect a career in these fields.[[5]](#endnote-5) These expectations are reflected in the workforce: a 2010 ILO study found that women working in the ICT sector tend to hold jobs at the bottom of the supply chain, such as in administrative and clerical roles, rather than the more lucrative managerial or technical roles.[[6]](#endnote-6) Another study of global trends in the ICT sector found that, on average, women account for 30% of operations technicians, but only 15% of managers and 11% of strategy and planning professionals.[[7]](#endnote-7)

## The reasons behind the gender digital divide

### Harmful gender stereotypes and lack of role models

Across the globe, the world of ICT is dominated by men. There is a deeply rooted misconception about boys and men being more naturally suited for these fields. In a 2016 survey, 51% of girls agreed with the statement that science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects “have the image of being more for boys” than girls.[[8]](#endnote-8) According to UNESCO, girls and women are poorly represented across the ICT fields but most notably in engineering and computer science, and in the latter there has been a steady drop in female graduates since 2000 across the world.[[9]](#endnote-9) This is particularly worrying, as the field of computer science and technology is becoming increasingly important for countries in terms of their economic growth, development and overall progress, and some level of basic computer skills is now required in almost every aspect of our daily lives.

There is a notable gap in reliable data on women’s and girls’ participation in the technology sector, especially outside of western countries. Available data suggests that traditional patterns of gender hierarchy are being replicated in the digital economy: men predominate in high-skilled, higher wage jobs, and women hold low-skilled, lower wage jobs with few benefits or less security. Women tend to hold jobs at the bottom of the supply chain in ICT, such as in administrative and clerical roles. Another study of global trends in this field found that, on average, women accounted for 30% of operations technicians, but only 15% of managers and 11% of strategy and planning professionals.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Research shows that, along with persistent stereotypes, “lack of support from role models” discourages girls from pursuing ICT studies after secondary education.[[11]](#endnote-11) There is, therefore, a risk that the present gender imbalance in the ICT workforce will lead to a continuation of the gender digital divide. For this reason, it is crucial to enlist female mentors and teachers for computer classes and other technology-related initiatives, and to take concrete action to break down stereotypes and harmful norms that prevent women and girls from learning vital digital skills and pursuing careers in the field of ICT.

### Cultural norms and attitudes

The reasons behind the digital gender divide are complex and vary between countries and regions, but are often related to a deeply rooted notion of girls as second-class citizens which leads to prioritizing the needs and best interest of boys at the expense of girls.[[12]](#endnote-12) These kinds of underlying barriers can also be referred to as social norms that influence girls’ role and status in virtually every level of the society, and therefore have a strong impact on their ability to access and use technology, access information, and to participate in civil life online. In households with only one phone it is common for the phone to be owned and controlled by male family members, limiting girls’ ability to develop their technical literacy[[13]](#endnote-13) as well as access information of a sensitive nature. Available research suggests that when a family buys a computer, it is often intended for the boy rather than the girl child, because parents can better envisage the potential for a boy to enter a future career in the ICT sector.[[14]](#endnote-14)

While great progress has been made in terms of reaching gender parity at the primary school level, girls’ attendance at the secondary level remains at a notably lower rate than that of boys in almost all developing countries. School is often the place where many children are introduced to technology such as laptops and tablets, and if girls are not in school, they are missing out on these opportunities to become familiar with technologies and learning basic ICT skills that would be invaluable for them in the labour market. Two thirds of the world’s over 700 million illiterate adults are women.[[15]](#endnote-15) Illiteracy is a huge barrier for girls’ and women’s ability to take advantage of technology and full functionality of their devices, such as mobile phones, even when these devices are available to them.

### Safety concerns

Safety issues can also be a barrier for girls and women to have access to technology and the internet. Parents may feel less inclined to allow girls to use mobile phones, laptops and access the internet because they believe it puts them at risk. According to Intel’s 2013 Women and the Web report, 25% of non-internet users between the ages of 14 and 17 reported that their families opposed them being online because they saw it as a risk for their safety and for fearing that they might meet someone dangerous online.[[16]](#endnote-16)

These fears are not unwarranted. The internet is a hostile place for females, and sexism and harassment is commonplace and often hard to control or prevent. Globally, women are 27 times more likely to experience gender-based violence online.[[17]](#endnote-17) This behaviour also aims to silence women and girls online and force them out of digital spaces, and impacts their right to culture, leisure, and play online. While violence online is an extension of violence and discrimination offline, behaviours committed online can be particularly pernicious, due to the often anonymous nature of online violence and harassment, the fact that hate can easily be amplified (including with bots[[18]](#endnote-18)), and that relatively permanent nature of online content. This can cause secondary victimization and re-traumatization of children who have experienced violence and harassment online.

Research by Plan International illustrates the unique risks that girls face online. A 2016 joint study by Plan International Australia and Our Watch, “Don’t Send me That Pic”, found that seven out of ten Australian girls aged 15-19 believe online harassment and bullying is endemic, and 51% of girls believe that girls are pressured into taking explicit photographs of themselves and sharing them. The study recommended that schools address and prevent cyberbullying through a systematic “whole school approach” supported by professional learning for staff, curriculum learning for students and education sessions for families, coupled with quality school policies and a positive school culture that encourages reporting of bullying.[[19]](#endnote-19) A 2016 study by Plan International UK, “The State of Girls in the UK” similarly found that “girls are clear about the immense pressures to meet certain standards [in digital communication] and the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying... [and] too frequently, measures designed to protect girls are ineffective or even have negative consequences”.[[20]](#endnote-20)

While online spaces definitely pose safety risks to girls and women, these risks are not unique to the internet but mirror the challenges women and girls already face in the offline world. The online-offline worlds constitute a continuum, particularly for so-called “digital natives”. The solution therefore is not to prevent women and girls from getting online, but to teach them about online safety, how to safeguard their private information and sensitive details, how to recognize potentially dangerous websites and how to protect themselves from abuse, online harassment and even the risk of trafficking. More importantly, the primary response we should adopt towards online safety issues is to work towards fixing the underlying causes by promoting gender equality, fighting patriarchy and misogyny, promoting diversity, and working towards societies where girls are valued and treated equally and fairly, both online and offline.

### Gender gap in ownership and use of technology

Girls and women lag behind boys and men and in both traditional and digital literacy. Nearly two thirds of the world’s 781 million illiterate adults are women,[[21]](#endnote-21) and men outscore women in “digital fluency” in almost all countries.[[22]](#endnote-22) This, in turn, makes it more difficult for girls and women to learn digital skills and capitalise on the potential of basic technology, such as mobile phones and SMS-based services. Lower digital literacy also makes girls and women more susceptible to risks associated with using technology and going online, such as unnecessary and high user fees, signing up for services they do not need, or inadvertently sharing too much private information about themselves.

Many services and tools exist that can make digital tools and technologies more approachable for people with low or no literacy skills, but there is further work required to make these tools more widely accessible. Therefore, bridging the traditional literacy gap as well as the digital literacy gap must be a priority issue as a component of broader efforts to ensure girls and women benefit from the digital revolution to an equal extent.

## Conclusion and recommendations

### Educate equally

The first step towards improving girls’ access to and use of technologies and digital spaces is to make them more relevant and safer for women and girls. To that end, governments should mainstream ICT and digital technology education in national curricula, and actively support and promote girls’ participation in these subjects, to ensure girls have equal access to opportunities in the workplaces of the future. It is also important to educate and engage with parents and caretakers in order to address concerns and facilitate girls’ access to online spaces.

Governments, families, civil society organisations and the private sector must also challenge the stereotypes that dissuade girls from studying subjects related to ICT, and pursuing careers in the ICT sector. One way of achieving this is to promote role models and mentors for girls so that they can grow up knowing and believing that their gender should not be a barrier for anything they want to do or become.

### Close the access and usage gap

Girls might be reluctant to access computer classes and internet cafes, because these spaces are often dominated by men or they are located in places that are not accessible to women. This can be remedied by creating classes and sessions specifically targeting girls in locations accessible to them, teaching digital literacy and ensuring they know how to get the most out of their devices. Other strategies to close the access and usage gap are to:

* Work with partners to encourage telecommunications companies and internet providers to bring down the cost of airtime, mobile data and broadband internet
* Ask girls what they need from technology: do they want to connect with their peers, access information, use it for mobile financial services, or something else? What currently prevents them from utilizing technology to improve their own lives? Ask enough questions to really understand why girls and women can’t currently take advantage of ICTs to their fullest, and work to break these barriers together with them.

### Make digital environments safe for girls

Ensuring girls and boys are aware of the risks associated with using technology and being online and know what to do and who to contact if anything makes them feel uneasy is a crucial part of closing the digital gender gap. This can be achieved through workshops, teacher training, cyber security classes and other such initiatives that aim to arm girls and boys with the knowledge and skills they need to be able to keep themselves safe online. In promoting cyber security, however, we must ensure that – without holding girls and women back in terms of their access to and use of technology – we are equipping them with the skills that they need to keep themselves safe from risks both offline and online. There is also need for technology and social media companies to make their digital environments safe girls, including by monitor violence and harassment on their platforms. This can, for example, be done allowing gender-based harassment/abuse to be reported as such, not just as general abuse.

### Empower girls and women to create technology and digital content

It is important to recognize the role of women and girls not just as users and consumers of technology, but as the developers and creators of it as well. Much of the technology and digital content we use today has been designed and developed by men – but research has shown that women and girls use technology and digital tools in a different ways to boys and men, and therefore their needs most likely are also different. Most of the existing research is from western countries, so a data gap also exists in terms of the priorities and needs of users, especially girls and women, in the global south.

It is essential that as we clear the path for women and girls to have access to technology and digital content on an equal level with boys and men, we also enable and promote their participation as the makers and creators of new inventions and innovations and provide young girls with role models that they can relate to in these fields.

1. Nikki van der Gaag et al., The State of the World’s Girls 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. World Bank, World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends (Washington DC: World Bank, 2016), 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. GSMA Connected Women, Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low and middle-income countries (London: GSMA, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. International Telecommunication Union, “ICT Facts and Figures 2016,” (International Telecommunication Union, 2016). Accessed at: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2016.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, “What kind of careers do boys and girls expect for themselves?,” PISA in Focus, 14 (2012), 1. Accessed at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/49829595.pdf  [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. International Labor Organization, Work in the New Economy (International Labor Organization, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Nidhi Tandon, A Bright Future in ICT Opportunities for a New Generation of Women (International Telecommunications Union, 2012), 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Girlguiding, What girls say about… digital technology (London: Girlguiding, 2016), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. UNESCO, “Science Report 2016: Towards 2030”, UNESCO Publishing (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ann Mei Chang and Catherine Powell, “Women in Tech as a Driver for Growth in Emerging Economies”, CFR Discussion Paper (Council on Foreign Relations: July 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Agueda Gras-Velazquez, Alexa Joyce and Maïté Debry, Women and ICT: why are girls and women still not attracted to ICT studies and careers? (Brussels: European Schoolnet, 2009), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nikki van der Gaag et al., The State of the World’s Girls 2010: Digital and Urban Frontiers (Plan International: 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. GSMA Connected Women, Bridging the gender gap (2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Intel Corporation, Women and the web: Bridging the Internet gap and creating new global opportunities in low and middle-income countries (California: Intel Corporation, 2013), 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. UNESCO, “Women and Girls’ Education: Facts and Figures”. Accessed at: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/international-womens-day-2014/women-ed-facts-and-figure/ [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Intel Corporation, Women and the Web (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *UN OHCHR. “*Human Rights Council holds Panel discussion on online violence against women human rights defenders*.” 21 June 2018. Available at:* https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23248&LangID=E [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *For more information on the role of bots in perpetuating violence and harassment online, please see: Lindstrom, N. “Why the Internet must become feminist.” 25 April 2019. Available at* https://plan-international.org/blog/2019/04/why-internet-must-become-feminist# [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Plan International Australia and Our Watch, Don’t send me that pic – online sexual harassment and Australian girls (Plan International: 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Plan International UK, The State of Girls Rights in the UK (Plan International UK: 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. United Nations, The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2015), xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Julie Sweet, “Access to Digital Technology Accelerates Global Gender Equality,” Harvard Business Review (May 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)