Input to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Bridging the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective

At the World Wide Web Foundation, we strive to promote the Internet as a human right and a public good. We believe the Internet is an important tool for everyone to seek and access information, build associations, innovate and solve problems, and to participate in civic life.

Using a blend of fresh research, policy advocacy and storytelling, our Women's Rights Online and Alliance for Affordable Internet programmes strive to promote women's empowerment through technology by working partnership with a coalition of over 80 diverse member organisations from around the world to support over 15 countries to implement gender responsive Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policies. Our work focuses on reforming policy and regulation so that everyone, everywhere can i) afford to connect and ii) have the skills and opportunities to participate the digital revolution privately and freely. We want to see evidence-based national ICT and gender plans established in at least seven new countries within five years.

In 2016 we also hosted the inaugural Africa Summit on Women and Girls in Technology. The Summit brought together nearly 170 digital equality advocates from across Africa and the world to share experiences, insights, and ideas for developing a strong digital future in Africa that is powered by — and empowering for — African women. We explored how technology policy can further the rights and interests of women in Africa, and how these policies can work to close the growing gender digital divide.

Now it's time to turn these conversations into action.

Defining the Problem: What is the Gender Digital Divide?

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are powerful tools for women's empowerment. Access to the Internet can support women to develop their own businesses and entrepreneurial ventures, secure wider access to credit, and increase their incomes. It can bolster women to enter the world of work by increasing their access to quality education and healthcare, and by enabling their participation in online networks and associations. More broadly, Internet access can give women a platform to have a voice, and to organise and advocate for more accountable government. Yet formidable gender gaps in Internet access, digital skills, and online rights and freedoms are undermining the Internet's potential to be a powerful tool for women to claim and demand their rights.

Our Women's Rights Online research reveals extreme gender inequalities in digital empowerment. Across urban poor areas in 10 cities, women are 50% less likely than men to be online, and 30-50% less likely to use the Internet for economic and political empowerment. The root causes of this are high costs, lack of digital know-how, scarcity of content that is relevant and empowering for women, and barriers to women speaking freely and privately online.

The Alliance for Affordable Internet, another Web Foundation initiative, released research that shed further light on how poverty and gender interact to keep as much as 80% of the population, mostly women, offline in some developing countries. Recent data from the International Telecommunications Union (2016) reveals that the digital gender gap is actually increasing in size.

In sum, our research shows that the dramatic spread of mobile phones is not enough to get women online, or to achieve empowerment of women through technology. Without a major escalation of policy effort and investment, most of the benefits of technological change will be captured by men — making gender inequality worse, not better.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a historic opportunity to halt and reverse growing digital gender gaps by turning political commitment into concrete interventions. With respect to digital equality, the SDGs commit UN member states to:

- enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology (ICT), to promote the empowerment of women (SDG 5b);
- achieve universal, affordable Internet access in least developed countries by 2020 (SDG 9c);
- ensure equal access to basic services [and] appropriate new technology for all women and men by 2030 (SDG 1.4).

Our inaugural Digital Gender Divide Audit released in September 2016 assesses the policy efforts and progress made in 10 developing countries towards achieving SDGs 1.4, 5b and 9c, in which governments have pledged to close the gender digital divide. Our assessment based on 5 key thematic areas (Internet Access and Women's Empowerment; Affordability; Digital Skills and Education; Relevant Content and Services; and Online Safety) suggests that governments are not doing nearly enough to achieve the SDG targets on women and technology by 2030.

Internet Access & Women's Empowerment
Governments have a long road ahead to achieve SDG commitments on ensuring equal access to new technology for all women and men by 2030, and leveraging ICTs to empower women. Although nearly every woman we surveyed in our Women's Rights Online research owned or had access to a phone, the ICT revolution is not yet transforming their lives. Many countries lack national or sub-national policies to encourage increased access, training, and use of the Web by

women and girls. A report by the [Broadband Commission's Working Group on Gender](#) found that a vast majority of National Broadband Plans fail to include gender targets.

Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to track progress. Majority of developing countries do not currently submit gender-disaggregated data on Internet use to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN agency responsible for tracking this indicator. The ITU has no gender-disaggregated data at all on other important ICT indicators. This has to change. SDG 17 commits governments to increase the availability of high-quality, timely, and reliable gender-disaggregated data.

Affordability

SDG 9c commits governments to strive to achieve universal, affordable Internet access by 2020. But [high costs](#) are keeping billions offline. Women — who earn [almost 25% less](#) than men globally — are particularly impacted by this high cost to connect and, as a result, face limited digital opportunities. Achieving Goal 9c will require bold and immediate action. On our current trajectory, the Alliance for Affordable Internet predicts that we'll hit this target in 2042 — 22 years after the target date set by the global community. Without urgent reform, in 2020 we will see just [16% of people in the world's poorest countries, and 53% of the world as a whole](#), connected. This connectivity lag will deny hundreds of millions of women and girls access to online education, health services, economic opportunity, political voice, and much more.

Digital Skills & Education

The UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment notes that "Digital inclusion is critical, especially for the poor, who risk being left further behind given the fast-changing nature of digital assets and services, and their importance to future employment and income opportunities" (2016:49). "Not knowing how" to use the Internet continues to be a significant barrier for women's digital inclusion. Our Women's Rights Online study of 10 countries highlights that, among the urban poor, women are 1.6 times more likely than men to cite lack of skills as a barrier to their Internet use. Digital capabilities are increasingly critical to maximise women's [earnings and employment prospects](#). Digital skills should be included as a critical component of school literacy curriculum across all education levels, along with reading and writing.

Relevant Content and Services

Due to the extra burden of unpaid care work that women carry, they not only have less income than men but also less free time. As a result, time and money spent on the Internet come at a high opportunity cost, and many women we interviewed said they simply don't feel that what they find online is worth their while. While there are many kinds of content and services that might inspire, entertain, or assist women, we have singled out two that are particularly critical to their rights and opportunities, and are also directly relevant to SDG targets: (1) online availability of sexual and reproductive health information and (2) digital financial services.

Our Women's Rights Online (2015) survey found that across urban poor areas of 10 countries (where 37% of women reported Internet use) [just under a quarter](#) have ever searched for sexual

and reproductive health information. In cities including Bogota, Jakarta and Lagos, over 50% of women surveyed reported never having looked for information on sexual and reproductive health or legal rights anywhere.

Our Digital Gender Gap Audit showed that across 10 developing countries women's access to mobile banking also remains low, with Kenya being the exception. In Nigeria, for example, just 2% of women have access to mobile financial services. Mobile money, and digital financial services in general, have not had high adoption rates as expected primarily because women's access to digital services in developing countries remains low, and - as noted in the 2015-16 A4AI Affordability Report - access and affordability of the devices to connect to these services remains prohibitively high.

Online Safety
Women we surveyed said they value the Internet as a safe space to access and share ideas and information of any kind, and express themselves without fear. Although vital to SDG 16 — Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — the Internet's role as a safe space for expression is being undermined by an epidemic of harassment and violence against women online, as well as growing intrusions on Internet users' right to privacy. In 74% of countries included in our 2014 Web Index study, law enforcement agencies and the courts are failing to take appropriate actions in situations where ICTs are used to commit acts of gender-based violence. Our Women's Rights Online study found over six in ten of connected women and men aged 18-24 had experienced online harassment, rising to nearly seven in ten of the young women who use the Internet daily. This is a matter of great concern since it is also among the youngest age group that we found greatest potential for women to leverage ICTs for empowerment. If these trends do not change, the spread of ICTs could ultimately reinforce offline patterns of female subordination and silence.

Finding Solutions: Action Agenda for achieving women's digital inclusion and empowerment by 2030

Without a major escalation of policy effort and investment, most of the benefits of technological change will be captured by men — further widening gender inequality However, women's exclusion from the digital revolution is primarily due to policy failure, and policy failure can be reversed. Rapid progress is possible through simple steps like reducing the cost to connect, introducing digital literacy in schools, and expanding public access facilities.

We propose these shared priorities as a starting point for broad regional and global consultation, in order to agree on an international action agenda and to REACT based on the issues outlined below. At the Web Foundation we are leading such regional and global consultations in collaboration with our A4AI partners and our Women's Rights Online network. We are working to sensitise and build the capacity of policymakers to implement the REACT framework, contextualising the REACT recommendations to national contexts in order to close the gender digital divide. By working together we can ensure that the full power of ICTs and the

Internet is harnessed by women, putting their agency at the forefront of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Rights = R
- Strengthen legal protection of the online rights and privacy of women and men, including through stronger data protection laws.
- Ensure that women and girls are able to take legal action against perpetrators of online violence, and that police and judiciary have training and resources to pursue such cases.
- Invest in large-scale, ongoing national awareness campaigns to stamp out online gender violence and educate users on their rights, privacy, and security.

Education = E
- Integrate basic digital literacy in school curricula at all levels — from primary to tertiary — and ensure that teachers are qualified and supported to teach it.
- Ensure digital literacy goes beyond technical skills to support the ability of women and girls to participate in society and make life choices.
- Support female micro-entrepreneurs to gain digital capabilities.

Access = A
- Prioritise policy reforms to cut the prohibitive cost of connecting. Work towards the Alliance for Affordable Internet affordability target: 1 GB of prepaid mobile data costing no more than 2% of average per capita monthly income.
- Expand free Internet access in public places, including all schools, clinics, job centres, and community centres.
- Improve infrastructure and support the development of innovative last mile-connectivity models, including by women's collectives and organisations.
- Consider access measures specifically targeting women, such as a free basic data allowance focused on women.

Content = C
- Expand availability of government services and data online, as well as channels for citizens to engage leaders and officials through ICTs.
- Prioritise wide online availability of user-friendly, local-language information, services and products that empower women and enhance their livelihoods.
- Audit all government websites to assess the relevance of their content for women, and their effectiveness in supporting women to access information.

Targets = T
- Incorporate concrete gender equity targets, backed by adequate budget allocations, into national ICT policies and/or broadband plans.
- Monitor gender equality in the implementation of ICT strategies by collecting data disaggregated by gender, income, and location. Develop quantitative and qualitative indicators that measure public ICT initiatives and their impact on women.