



Engender response to the Scottish Government Consultation on the Digital Strategy for Scotland

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1. Introduction

Engender works to advance women's economic, social and cultural, and political equality with men. We undertake policy and advocacy work with the ambition to make visible the ways in which women's unequal access to resources, safety, rights and power impact Scotland.

Digital access is a gendered issue, with women comprising around 58% of internet non-users in the UK.¹ Women face myriad barriers to digital access, including possessing fewer digital skills² and less digital confidence than men and being more likely to have insufficient resources to afford digital equipment. Where women and girls do have digital access, experiences of online misogynistic harassment and abuse severely impact freedom to make full and equal use of online spaces.

Engender therefore welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government Consultation on the Digital Strategy for Scotland. Our view is that digital inclusion can and should encompass action to address the gendered barriers and inequalities that exist for internet non-users and users alike. A strategy that mainstreams these gendered issues will contribute to the advancement of women's equality and rights.

To focus on our concerns, we have elected to approach this consultation by focusing on the key theme of the consultation paper's vision, 'no one left behind'. In doing so, we explain what the relationship between gender and digital inclusion is and make a number of recommendations for how this vision can be realised for women and girls.

¹ Office for National Statistics (2019) 'Exploring the UK's digital divide.' Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04> (Accessed 5 November 2020).

² This is true of both basic or foundational digital skills and advanced digital skills, such as those necessary to pursue careers in ICT. Further information is available at European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

2. Gendered barriers to digital access

2.1 Digital skills

Women are less likely to possess digital skills than men, and this gap is particularly wide amongst older people. According to UK-wide research undertaken by Lloyds Bank, 62% of retired men are in possession of essential digital skills compared to 43% of women.³ This unequal distribution of skills is likely a reflection of women and men's differential access to digital education, time and resources. When asked why they had not used the internet in the last three months, 30% of women respondents answered 'no time' compared to 16% of men.⁴ With women in Scotland comprising the vast majority of lone parents and undertaking the majority of unpaid care and domestic work,⁵ time poverty is likely to be a barrier for women both in terms of accessing digital skills education or training, and in accessing digital devices day-to-day for leisure or other purposes.

To bridge this digital skills gap, adult digital skills education should ensure that it is gender-sensitive and designed with women's needs in mind. For example, this may involve scheduling education and training at times and locations that fit with women's paid and unpaid work or caring roles. Digital skills initiatives should also target specific groups of women through existing women's organisations and networks, particularly Black and minoritised and disabled women's organisations. In addition, funding programmes and streams such as Connecting Scotland should include specific criteria to narrow gendered digital gaps. Their impact on women and girls should be considered by programme-wide equality impact assessment and also in evaluation post-delivery.

2.1.1 Gendered stereotypes about technology

Gendered norms around technology and digital skills play a role in early subject choice, generally funnelling men and boys into higher-paid sectors that are prioritised for investment, such as ICT. These gendered norms contribute to occupational segregation and the gender pay gap, whilst simultaneously leaving women and girls under-prepared for increasing reliance on digital products in all areas of life. Engender therefore welcomes the pledge to increase diversity in the digital technologies sector, and recognises the emerging positive work undertaken by the Scottish Government in

³ Lloyds Bank (2020) 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020.' Available at: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Engender (2020) 'Gender & Unpaid Work: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Caring Roles.' Available at: https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/1594974358_Gender--unpaid-work---the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-womens-caring-roles.pdf.

this area so far.⁶ Continuing to address gender stereotyping from a young age, as well as other structural barriers, is essential to supporting more women and girls to feel confident using technology and to pursue careers in ICT and digital technologies.⁷ Zero Tolerance is due to publish a scoping study on how Scotland can scale up attitude and culture change work to dismantle stereotypes about what girls and women should study, work at, and be.⁸ It is vital that Scottish Government's Digital Directorate links with this and other relevant programmes as part of its digital inclusion work.

The expertise of Equate Scotland should also be drawn upon on in addressing gendered stereotypes in ICT, and Scottish Government should continue to fund its vital work.

2.2 Resources

Living in poverty is strongly correlated with possessing few or no digital skills,⁹ and makes it much more difficult to afford IT equipment and resources like mobile phones, laptops and broadband. The percentage of households with an internet connection increases with income, with almost all (99%) of households in Scotland with an annual income of £40,000 and over having home internet access, compared to 69% of households with an income of less than £10,000.¹⁰

Income as a determinant of digital exclusion has significant gendered implications because women are overrepresented in low-income groups. 19% of female pensioners in Scotland are in relative poverty compared to 13% of male pensioners,¹¹ which likely contributes to the gendered digital divide in older people. Amongst working age people, the 'economically inactive' are the most likely to be internet non-users, with this group encompassing women undertaking unpaid childcare or other unpaid care

⁶ Scottish Government, Science and research: women in STEM. Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/policies/science-and-research/women-stem/> (Accessed 4 November 2020).

⁷ European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

⁸ Zero Tolerance (2020) 'Gender Institute.' Available at: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/gender-institute/> (Accessed 5 November 2020).

⁹ Lloyds Bank (2018) 'UK Consumer Digital Index 2018.' Available at:

https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf.

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2018) 'Scottish Household Survey 2018: annual report.' Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-people-annual-report-results-2018-scottish-household-survey/pages/7/> (Accessed 5 November 2020).

¹¹ Scottish Government (2019) 'Poverty and income inequality in Scotland: 2015-2018.' Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2015-18/pages/7/> (Accessed 14 October 2020).

work.¹² Lone mothers are at significant risk of poverty,¹³ meaning that many women and their children will not have the resources to access digital equipment. Disabled women also face acute barriers to digital inclusion with disabled people comprising 56% of UK adult internet non-users,¹⁴ and may also face increased costs where modified devices are necessary.

Engender therefore welcomes the work of Connecting Scotland and the aim to end digital exclusion. However, we would also like Scotland's digital strategy to be more explicit about how the barrier of poverty and low-income will be overcome to ensure digital inclusion. Scottish Government must set out its plans for ensuring that women can afford devices, broadband, and other long-term running costs.

In addition, we advocate for increased collection of sex-disaggregated data that records how frequently and where women and men use digital devices. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have necessitated increased sharing of digital equipment within households, particularly with children requiring digital equipment to learn from home. Sharing equipment, as opposed to having a personal device, not only reduces the amount of time that these may be used for work, education, appointments, or other services, but may compromise privacy. This may be particularly acute for women with limited space at home (making it difficult to attend virtual medical appointments, for example), and extremely difficult or impossible for women experiencing domestic abuse. More sex-disaggregated, gender-sensitive data on digital access is required to get a fuller picture of women and men's day-to-day barriers.¹⁵

2.3 Domestic abuse and technology

Domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence are very likely to affect women's digital access, with technology increasingly used to facilitate stalking and other forms of abuse.¹⁶ This includes a range of controlling and coercive behaviours such as threatening phone calls, cyber-stalking, GPS tracking, harassment on social media sites, use of the Internet of Things to control or intrude upon women's environment, and the dissemination of intimate images without consent. Emerging forms of ICT are facilitating new types of gender-based violence and inequalities in access to technologies, as well as hindering women's and girl's full enjoyment of their

¹² Office for National Statistics (2019) 'Exploring the UK's digital divide.'

¹³ Scottish Government (2019) 'Poverty and income inequality in Scotland: 2015-2018.' Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2015-18/pages/7/> (Accessed 14 October 2020).

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics (2019) 'Exploring the UK's digital divide.'

¹⁵ Engender (2020) Covid-19: Gathering and using data to ensure that the response integrates women's equality and rights. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Covid-19-Gathering-and-using-data-to-ensure-that-the-response-integrates-womens-equality-and-rights.pdf>.

¹⁶ H. Al-Alosi (2018) 'Cyber-Violence: Digital Abuse in the Context of Domestic Violence.' *UNSW Law Journal* 40(4), pp. 1573-1603.

human rights.¹⁷ The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has warned that the use of ICT without a human rights-based approach and action to prohibit online gender-based violence could even further intensify gender-based violence against women and girls in society.¹⁸

The Scottish Government's Equally Safe strategy understands all forms of violence against women and girls, including online violence, as both a cause and consequence of women's wider inequality.¹⁹ To fulfil the Scottish Government's ambitions for women's equality and rights, Scotland's digital strategy has an important role to play. In recognition of this, Engender would like to see Scotland's digital strategy make explicit links with Equally Safe.

To answer question one of the consultation about collaboration and partnership with other organisations, we would encourage the Digital Directorate to engage specifically with violence against women organisations, including Rape Crisis Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid, in developing Scotland's digital strategy.

2.4 Cyber abuse and harassment

Finally, the threat and reality of misogynistic and sexualised abuse and harassment experienced by women and girls online considerably hinders women's access to digital spaces, as well as threatening their physical safety and wellbeing. A survey conducted by Amnesty International and Ipsos Mori found that one in five UK women aged 18-55 have experienced abuse or harassment through social media.²⁰ Young women aged between 18 to 24 are particularly affected, with more than one in three (37%) experiencing online abuse. Almost half of this abuse was considered by the women surveyed to be sexist or misogynistic, and more than a quarter contained threats of physical or sexual violence. As a result of this abuse or harassment, 67% of women in the UK experienced a feeling of apprehension when thinking about using the internet or social media, and 24% said they had stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues. Further research has illustrated the racist, homophobic and

¹⁷ Human Rights Council (2018) Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session38/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session38/Documents/A_HRC_38_47_EN.docx&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1 (Accessed 4 December 2020).

¹⁸ Human Rights Council (2018) Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

¹⁹ Scottish Government (2018) Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy to eradicate violence against women. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-prevent-eradicate-violence-against-women-girls/pages/1/>.

²⁰ Amnesty International (2017) More than a quarter of UK women experiencing online abuse and harassment receive threats of physical or sexual assault – new research. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/more-quarter-uk-women-experiencing-online-abuse-and-harassment-receive-threats> (Accessed 5 November 2020).

transphobic nature of this abuse, with Black women, women of colour and LBT women at increased risk of abuse and harassment.²¹

Women journalists and politicians, particularly those who speak publicly about human rights or feminism, are also especially at risk.²² A cross-country study of violence against women in parliaments reveals that almost 82% of women parliamentarians have experienced 'psychological violence' (such as threats, character assassination, stalking and online abuse) and over 44% have received threats of death, rape, other physical violence or kidnapping.²³ This deters women and girls from entering politics or pursuing other high-profile careers.

Whilst abuse is most prevalent on social media sites,²⁴ the Covid-19 pandemic, and concomitant shift to virtual meetings and working from home for many women, has increased women's exposure to cyber abuse and harassment on professional platforms. This has been highlighted in media reports, for example of 'zoom-bombing' and of male colleagues exposing themselves during video conferences.

Witnessing and experiencing online abuse and violence can result in women's exclusion from public discourse and perpetuates gender inequality by impeding women's social contact as well as employment and networking opportunities.²⁵ We have argued elsewhere for a standalone misogyny offence to reflect the severity of such experiences for the wellbeing, safety and rights of women and girls.²⁶ The misogyny working group, which will be chaired by Helena Kennedy QC, Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws, should explicitly consider criminal justice responses to online misogynistic harassment and harms.

To ensure the Scottish Government digital strategy meets its vision of 'no one left behind', we recommend that the strategy encompasses online abuse and harassment within its understanding of digital barriers and recognises the gendered and racialised

²¹ Human Rights Council (2018) Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

²² Catherine Adams (2018) 'They Go for Gender First' The nature and effect of sexist abuse of female technology journalists.' *Journalism Practice* 12(7), pp. 850-869.

Gardiner, Mansfield and Anderson et al. (2016) 'The dark side of Guardian comments.' *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments> (Accessed 5 November 2020).

²³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018) Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/Documents/Issues/Women/ViolenceAgainstWomeninPoliticsReport.pdf&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1.

²⁴ End Violence Against Women and Glitch (2020) The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Glitch-and-EVAW-The-Ripple-Effect-Online-abuse-during-COVID-19-Sept-2020.pdf>.

²⁵ C. Adams (2018) "'They Go for Gender First'" The nature and effect of sexist abuse of female technology journalists.' *Journalism Practice* 12(7), pp. 850-869.

²⁶ Engender (2019) Making women safer in Scotland: The case for a standalone misogyny offence. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Making-Women-Safer-in-Scotland---the-case-for-a-standalone-misogyny-offence.pdf>.

nature of this barrier. To ensure policy coherence, the strategy should make explicit links with Equally Safe and a Fairer Scotland for Women, the gender pay gap action plan.

There are a number of other actions that might be taken to address gendered online abuse and harassment. The Scottish Government should:

- Form a taskforce to investigate and address the prevalence of online abuse and harassment in Scotland.
- Engage with social media corporations about tackling online misogyny. The Scottish Government should work with the UK Government on its proposed strategy to address ‘online harms’, emphasising the necessity of a gender competent approach to ensure the safety of women and other marginalised groups.
- Legislate, regulate and enable employers and other actors to protect women from online misogynistic abuse experienced while undertaking work activities.
- In fulfilment of its gender equality aims and in accordance with the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Scottish Government should also ensure through its economic development agencies, including the Scottish National Investment Bank, that it invests only in technologies that demonstrate a commitment to promoting the equality and rights of women and girls, and avoids investing in technologies that harm women.

Ultimately, addressing gendered abuse and harassment and improving women’s digital inclusion requires a multifaceted response to gender inequality and more equitable treatment of women offline as well as online.²⁷ It is for this reason that we believe that strong links between strategies are necessary.

3. CONCLUSION

Digital access is highly gendered, with women facing unique barriers. These barriers are heightened and compounded for disabled women, women experiencing poverty, and/or Black and minoritised women.

Gender-blind data and policy responses that focus exclusively or predominantly on internet non-users ignore these barriers. To overcome this, we recommend that the digital strategy include the following features:

²⁷ E. Jane (2020) ‘Online abuse and harassment.’ The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication (eds K. Ross, I. Bachmann, V. Cardo, S. Moorti and M. Scarcelli).

- That the strategy itself be gender competent, and responsive to women's distinct needs, and explicitly link with Equally Safe and the gender pay gap action plan.
- Ensuring that all digital skills education is gender-sensitive and accessible to different groups of women.
- Continued funding of organisations working to diversify STEM.
- Increased and enhanced collection of intersectional gender-sensitive, sex-disaggregated data on women and men's digital access.
- Commitment to work with violence against women organisations to address gendered digital abuse.
- Speak to public funding for technologies, through economic development spend, including the Scottish National Investment Bank. Such funding should be conditional on demonstrating how they will ensure the equality and rights of women and marginalised groups.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is a membership organisation working on feminist agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women's power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.