

HOW DIGITALISATION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS CAN STRENGTHEN ONE ANOTHER

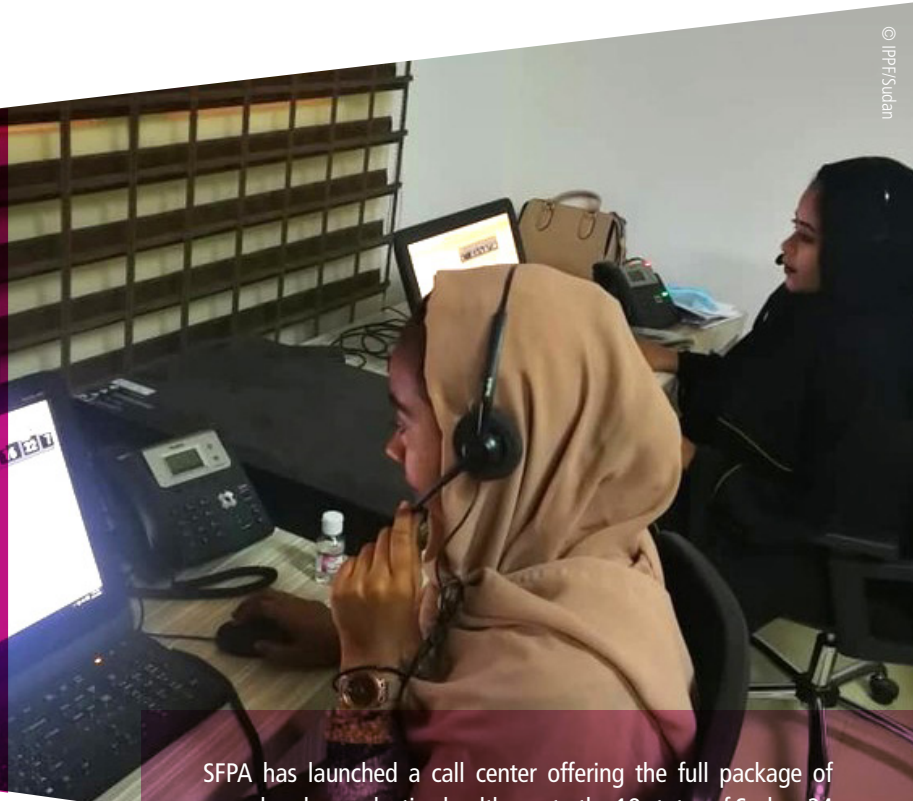


DIGITALISATION OFFERS AMAZING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALTH AND EMPOWERMENT AROUND THE WORLD, BUT ENSURING EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION IN THE INTERNET AGE THROWS UP MANY CHALLENGES, AND THE STAKES ARE HIGHEST IN VULNERABLE AND UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES, PARTICULARLY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS.

The European Commission has made supporting the digital transformation a priority of its development cooperation, and the EU's strategy with Africa¹ identifies it as a strategic pillar. Now Europe must work to get global digitalisation right if it is to deliver on its commitments to leave no one behind and achieve Agenda 2030. **The EU and its partner countries should seize the opportunity to invest in digitalisation and ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights**, including services, information and education, as well as promotion of gender equality and human rights in the digital world.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf

² ITU, 2019. Measuring digital development. Facts and figures 2019. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>



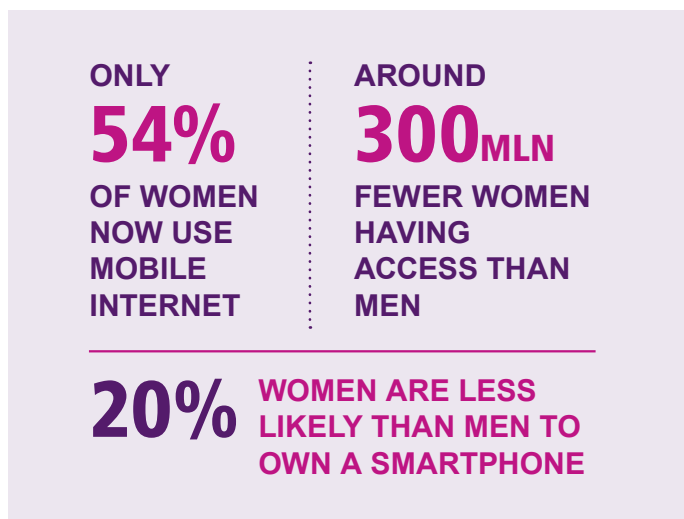
SFPA has launched a call center offering the full package of sexual and reproductive healthcare to the 18 states of Sudan, 24 hours per day, and is expected to reach 73.8% of the population who own phones. Care will be provided on two levels; a general practitioner who will offer information, counselling, prescription for contraception or a referral to the second level, who will be either an obstetrician or gynaecological consultant.

DIGITALISATION AND THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY MUST GO HAND IN HAND



The rise of digitalisation is undoubtedly one of the most important trends of recent years: **more and more people around the world are using the Internet and Internet-based technologies to connect, interact, access services and information, and share ideas.** An estimated 4.1 billion people were using the Internet in 2019. While this represents a 5.3% increase compared with 2018, it still means that **only 53% of the world is connected today²** — with people in poorer regions far less likely to be online, along with women and those living in remote and rural areas.

In order to maximise the impact of the digital transformation, it is important to ensure no one is left behind, especially women and girls. But the significant global gender gap in the access, use and ownership of digital technologies limits the equitable realisation of their benefits. In Least Developed Countries around only 54% of women now use mobile Internet, with around 300 million fewer women having access than men. Women are also 20% less likely than men to own a smartphone³.



Women around the world face unique barriers to fully benefiting from the Internet. These range from digital skills and education gaps, to affordability barriers worsened by income inequality, to online harassment and infringements on digital rights⁴. Many of these challenges lie at the root of gender inequalities globally: higher levels of illiteracy, inherent biases and negative gender norms and stereotypes, and lower school attainment rates are among the key obstacles that hinder women and girls' access to digitalisation⁵.

Closing the digital gender divide is essential if the EU is to achieve its objective of promoting gender equality worldwide, as stated in the new Gender Action Plan. At the same time, the achievement of gender equality is a prerequisite if the EU is to promote a digital transformation that truly leaves no one behind. **Promoting gender-transformative development policies, including by supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), is fundamental to make sure everyone can benefit from the digital transformation.**

Finally, digital equality is important not only for individual rights and empowerment, but also as a vital driver of economic growth and prosperity, which is another EU priority for its development cooperation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL TOOLS TO PROMOTE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR)

Technology and digital tools can play an essential role in achieving the EU's objective of achieving gender equality, including by increasing access to reliable, factual information and advice on issues related to SRHR (for example family planning, STI prevention and counselling, as well as on power balance within relationships and gender identity). Technology can be used to deliver information and services to people in a simple and accessible manner. Digital applications have been developed to tackle issues ranging from delivering vital health information to pregnant women and girls to reporting instances of sexual and gender-based violence. In many countries, technology can be a viable alternative to fill in the gap on information about sexuality and reproduction when comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is absent from school curricula.

In particular, more and more people around the world are using digital tools to access health services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. It is estimated that some 1.3 billion people used mobile health services in 2018 – an increase of 230 million since the previous year.⁶ The European Commission recognises the importance of digital transformation in "improving access to health services in remote areas and by facilitating diagnostics and treatments"⁷.

In developing countries, the use of mobile technology to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services is especially widespread among young people. Mobile phones provide a cost-effective, efficient and highly suitable communication channel for reaching and engaging youth. Digital tools are particularly effective because they reduce stigma, ensure confidentiality, and cut costs and challenges linked to reaching health facilities. Studies have proven that providing SRH information via mobile phones is highly appealing to young people and can positively influence their SRH outcomes, including improving knowledge, reducing risky sexual behaviour, and increasing utilisation of health services.⁸ It should nevertheless be noted that digital solutions for SRHR are particularly effective when they complement and support the delivery of physical services.

³ GSMA, 2020. Connected Women. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

⁴ World Wide Web Foundation, 2020. Women's Rights Online: Closing the digital gender gap for a more equal world <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/10/Womens-Rights-Online-Report-1.pdf>

⁵ OECD, 2018. Bridging the digital gender divide. <http://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.gsma.com/betterfuture/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-09-24-a60d6541465e86561f37f0f77ebee0f7-1.pdf>

⁷ European Commission, 2020. Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa. https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf

⁸ Ippoliti and L'Engle, 2017. Meet us on the phone: mobile phone programs for adolescent sexual and reproductive health in low-to-middle income countries. <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-016-0276-z>

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown measures have had a negative impact on access to sexual and reproductive health services, in particular for people in vulnerable situations and marginalised communities. In addition, cases of sexual and gender-based violence have increased globally.

These challenges make clear the importance of leveraging technology and digital tools to guarantee the continued provision of SRH services. The use of digital solutions started as a temporary solution to the crisis, but has had positive impacts and could become more permanent with the support of international donors.

Civil society organisations are finding ways to continue delivering SRHR care when face-to-face consultations are harder or not possible. For instance, IPPF Member Associations in Burundi and Central African Republic are offering CSE through social media, WhatsApp, Skype or other virtual channels, as well as home/doorstep delivery of SRH products like contraceptives and pregnancy test kits⁹. Likewise, FPA Sri Lanka has launched a hotline, called “Happy Life”, to give SRH advice and to provide psychological and social support to clients throughout this period.

BEST PRACTICES

A YOUTH-FRIENDLY DIGITAL TOOL HELPS COMBAT SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN UGANDA



It has been estimated that, among 18-24 year-old Ugandans, one in three girls (35%) and one in six boys (17%) have experienced sexual violence during their childhoods. Among children aged 13-17 years, one in four girls (25%) and one in ten boys (11%) have reported sexual violence in the previous year.¹⁰ In addition, fewer than 30% of sexual violence survivors report to a health facility within 72 hours, a crucial window for collecting evidence and attending to immediate health needs.

UNFPA and partner organisations brought together more than 80 young people, in order to generate innovative solutions to this and other longstanding SRH challenges.

This led in 2015 to the development of SafePal, a mobile application designed by youth to enable young people, girls in particular, to anonymously report episodes of sexual violence, helping to reduce the time gap between reporting and intervention through quick referrals¹¹.

In 2020, thanks to support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, SafePal has been upgraded into a fully-fledged interactive application to promote communication and information exchange on gender-based violence, SRH and HIV among young people, in addition to supporting reporting cases

⁹ https://www.countdown2030europe.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/EU%20protect%20SRHR_of%20COVID-19_final.pdf

¹⁰ Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. Violence against Children in Uganda: Findings from a National Survey, 2015. Kampala, Uganda: UNICEF, 2015. <http://www.togetherforgirls.org/wp-content/uploads/VACS-REPORT-FINAL-LORES-2-1.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_Innovation_web_V2.pdf



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