Tech4Families

In-depth Interview Report
With Key Stakeholders Examining
the Gender Digital Divide in
Northern Nigeria

April 2019
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Executive Summary & Key Recommendations

The technological innovation of smart phones and internet has had an immeasurable impact on the lives of individuals across the globe, through creating an easier path to many activities of everyday life. Various gadgets, connected to the internet, have positively changed the way the world communicates, use humor, study, work, and behave. Despite a so called ‘digital revolution’ across many countries, the use of technology among women and girls continues to be low in northern Nigeria, with female residents of rural and low-income settings carrying the highest burden in terms of lack of access and limited usage. A number of studies have explored the nature of technology utilization in Nigeria and the governing factors associated with it and have elicited relevant findings that will help address the issue. However, these studies were mostly administered quantitatively, hence, not fully exploring the phenomenon through a cultural/normative lens. Considering the prevalent issue of the gender digital divide, and the role of cultural and gender norms to the sustainable uptake of technology by women and girls in northern Nigeria, Equal Access International with support from DDHub conducted 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) unearthing patterns in individual and community attitudes, norms and beliefs that inform perspectives on women and girls' access to technology. The interviews sought to better understand specific data related to what type of technology individuals have access to (e.g. flip phones, smartphones, Internet cafes, or others) and what inhibitors they face, as well as the commonality of those inhibitors, including knowledge, literacy, and cost. Through in-person and virtual in-depth interviews with a range of participants, including religious leaders, teachers, NGO professionals, Government officials and those working in the technology sectors, vital information was revealed which will inform the design of the Tech4Families intervention and add to the body of work addressing the issue. Specific, thematic areas that were inductively constructed based on responses of participants were: benefits of technology utilization, barriers to technology utilization, mechanisms of improving technology utilization, general perception towards technology utilization, family/community control over access to technology, societal attitude and influence,

the role of radio programs in promoting technology utilization, religious views on technology utilization, and governmental/non-governmental organizations’ views regarding the use of technology. As a result of the research conducted, the following insights emerged:

i. Governments at federal and state levels should provide public schools with equipped computer laboratories where girls will be continuously trained on positive usage of technology.

ii. National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) should collaborate with National Orientation Agency (NOA) to educate the public on what technology offers to girls and women.

iii. Community and religious leaders should be sensitized on the benefits of technology to women and girls.

iv. Women and girls should be educated on safe and beneficial usage of technology as well ways of preventing themselves against online risks and harassments.

v. Equal Access International Nigeria should use its existing and future fellows in awareness creation on the importance of technology and the Internet for women and girls.

vi. Specific sections of the cybercrime act involving intimidating and harassing women online should be publicized and the public should be encouraged to report cases and prompt action taken.

vii. There should be a helpline for women and girls to report harassment, bullying, and intimidation online.

viii. Local language content and curriculum should be produced and distributed advocating for women and girls use of technology and the Internet.

ix. Internet service providers and telecommunications companies should be encouraged to provide connectivity especially public girls schools.

x. Findings of this report should be widely circulated in order to get numerous stakeholders.

xi. More educational applications ought to be developed and girls should be encouraged to use them on their smart phones as that will make more families value the use of technology.
Introduction
The goal of the Tech4Families project is to reduce the gender digital divide through empowering women and girls to access and use digital technology to drive positive health, education, and livelihood outcomes for themselves and their families. The main objectives of the project are:

- To reduce cultural and patriarchal barriers to women and girls’ access to technology.
- Increase digital literacy within the family.
- Generate community awareness of the benefits of women and girls’ access to technology.
- Create a case study that proves an approach to the gender digital divide centered on cultural norms work.

Equal Access International’s (EAI) approach to lessening the gender digital divide is to address the aforementioned normative barriers to women and girls’ access to and use of technology at the family level as a critical first step. Our design is grounded in a flexible, adaptive, community-centered approach that begins with in-depth formative research and includes measurement and evaluation inflection points throughout the program to ensure we can pivot the program, based on community input, to achieve our objectives. The project is designed to facilitate an enabling environment, which includes working with family units, producing narrative and non-fiction content that models new behavior via familiar characters and trusted influencers, and facilitated exercises that illustrate the benefits of the Internet for the whole family.

Statement of the Problem

In Northern Nigeria, an estimated 60% of the female population does not have access to the Internet or smart phones. Women’s lack of access is due to multiple obstacles including cost, literacy, appropriate and relevant content in Hausa, knowledge of the potential benefits of the Internet, and cultural and patriarchal gender norms that restrict access. This final barrier; cultural
and gender norms, is critical to the sustainable uptake of technology by women and girls in Northern Nigeria. According to a study conducted by the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD)\(^2\), 55% of men do not want their wives to use the Internet, and 61% of fathers discourage their daughters’ use. Clerics preach against women’s use, and statistics show both sexes have internalized these ideologies. A 2018 Groupe Special Mobile Association (GSMA) study\(^3\) illustrated that 24% of female respondents chose the option “family does not approve” as a significant barrier to mobile access. The perspective held by many in international development is that technology is a silver bullet for solving development issues. Without applying a gender lens to program design, technology can exacerbate inequality and actually contribute to, not reduce the gender digital divide.

**Research Approach**

As part of the formative research for the Tech4Families project, Equal Access International and DD Hub conducted 20 in depth Interviews (IDIs) with teachers, religious leaders, NGO workers, Government representatives and people working in the tech industry in Nigeria. The purpose of the IDIs was to unearth more deeply and from a more informed perspective, the norms surrounding women and girls’ lack of access to technology and the internet in a typical northern Nigerian setting. Each interviewer conducted 5 IDIs, and as a result of each conversation, an audio recording, an interview transcription, an analytical review of information obtained from interviews, and in-depth notes from including top line summaries of the most important findings and most relevant quotes were compiled after each interview. All interview respondents residing in Kano were interviewed at the Equal Access Nigeria office; the remaining 10 residing outside of Kano were conducted via phone, Skype or Google Hangouts.

The list of persons interviewed was provided by Equal Access International along with a question guide. All individuals on the list were contacted and notified about the interview in advance and

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\(^2\) Towards a Gender Digital Inclusion Agenda for Nigeria, CITAD (2018);

\(^3\) The Mobile Gender Gap Report, GSMA (2018)
were given the chance to decline to be interviewed. Each interview lasted between one to one and half hours, or as required to obtain all necessary information from the interviewee. To ensure credibility of data collected from interviewees, the interviewer cross-checked responses with the interviewee to ensure it reflected their opinion. The interviewer also deployed probing questions, to get enough information out of the interviewee. Interviews were conducted in English language to ensure that communication was clear and the possibility of misinterpretation was minimized.

**FINDINGS**

1. **Benefits/deliverables of technology to women and girls**

Use of and access to technology by women and girls has certainly yielded personal and societal development and those able to use the internet have found it easier to access a plethora of information relevant to their daily lives. Interview respondents generally echoed this belief, stating that this reformation regarding the accessibility of technological innovations by women and girls in recent years has positively impacted their lives in various aspects. Specifically, mentioned was access to *educational resources, entrepreneurial guidance, parenting and cooking tips*, hence highlighting information related to household roles, work and education that were deemed both acceptable and beneficial for women and girls to access. Not all respondents limited the benefits of access to information in terms of specific areas, as one interviewee noted:

> “The use and access to technology opens up a lot of opportunities that we can’t quantify”.

Most of the respondents cited education as one of the areas where women and girls benefit immensely and could in turn benefit their families. According to them, technology is continuously replacing the in-person learning method with virtual learning which is friendlier, cheaper and easier to handle.

> “The woman is the first teacher, teaching the children she could make use of the technology to make things easier for the children, teach them how to add, subtract, do mathematics and English …, you know there is the BBC Children’s program that they have online, it’s all technology, so she could use that, she doesn’t have to send her children somewhere, and
it could be in her home, they could be doing it together. What she doesn’t understand and may be shy of asking in class she could use technology to solve some of her problems through Google or something online. Using technology provides women with a virtual learning space”

Beyond the family setting, technology was also cited as beneficial for women and girls themselves, with interviewees noting the positive use of smart phones to install helpful applications, download books to read, research school assignments and access educational games. One respondent even went as far as to suggest the internet could replace school, remarking “if you cannot afford to pay school fees to go to a school, at least you have it on the internet”. Emphasizing the relevance of internet, another respondent described it as “eye opener to girls and women”

Families stay in touch through the use of technology even though they may be thousands of kilometers apart. Therefore, use of technology by women and girls has established a linkage of exchanging ideas and information and many of the respondents (particularly those from NGO or Tech industry backgrounds) echoed this in their interviews:

“It has benefitted women and girls in terms of education, in terms of business, in terms of communications in terms of also interactions and particularly international interactions. It has…connected women and girls to the global world…”

From a communication angle, respondents noted how technology has benefitted women and girls immensely by giving them the platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Skype etc. to communicate. It was also noted how technology has enabled women and girls to run small and big businesses from home compounds, leveraging technology to operate effectively. For example, using **WhatsApp, Instagram** and other for marketing purposes.

“…you know whatever you post on social media it gets to the world immediately, so, my advice to women is to always use social media in advertising their goods and services.”

Those who are not able to access technology directly, were also mentioned as being able to benefit from information acquired by their counterparts, who then pass that information on verbally.
Due to certain cultural practices, mobility of women in Northern Nigeria is frequently limited, with many women and girls confined largely to their family compound. In these cases, accessing technology and the internet was also seen as a positive, enabling women to get information on variety of issues especially through search engines such as Google.

**Risks associated with women’s access to technology**

*Although the benefits of accessing the Internet / technology were easily cited by most respondents, the risks were also made very clear.*

> Well for all advantages there are disadvantages. There are risks. Because some use internet positively while others use it negatively. For those who use it positively I would say they have benefitted. And for those who are using it negatively, it is like affecting and having like a risk to them, like for women and girls who are using it in terms of pornography, committing crimes, terrorism and what have you, I think it has really affected them in those areas.

The link between the internet and increased risk of exposure to immoral or sexual content was cited by a number of interviewees who feared for women and girls perceived weakness in the face of such content: “*If they not the right orientation they will go for consuming content that are bad for them especially with the prevalent of pornographic sites and issue around terrorism and drug abuse …*”. Whilst the women themselves were seen to be at risk, the greater risk was the reputation of families whose daughters or wives were taking part in indecent activities online “*in our culture women are not independent. They are dependent on the family so that whatever they do whether negative or positive will go back to the family*”

The risk of violence against women was believed by some to increase with access to the internet, however again, in some cases this was linked more to a fear of family reputations being tarnished for allowing daughters or wives to use the internet freely. Alongside being corrupted, another reoccurring risk, cited more often by male respondents, was the chance that women would become addicted to the internet / technology and would not focus on their chores or household tasks.

> A little addiction to the technology and away from their primary activities can actually make the husbands or relatives around to be paranoid towards their use of technology,

Overall, the fear of moral corruption and the perceived weakness of women to control themselves in the face of inappropriate content on the internet were stated frequently both as risks as well as reasons for restricting women and girls access to the internet.
Factors impeding the use of technology by women

When asked about the factors impeding the use of technology by women respondents mentioned many of the same limiting factors including: ignorance on the significant uses of the net, poverty, financial constraints and lack of awareness. NGO and Technology participants emphasized the patriarchal nature of the society and how male dominance politically, economically and socially played an important role in preventing women and girls’ from accessing technology more fully.

Religious leaders during the interview admitted that culture plays a significant role in impeding the use of technology by women in the north. One participant said “Women and girls in the north, their culture differs from that of their counterpart in the south. In the south people are conversant with patronizing internet cafes even if they don’t have access to the internet over their phones. The access is equal to everyone, while in the northern part because of the religion and culture they tend to be shy going to internet cafes”.

When asked of their awareness on gender-based violence against women online many of them agreed that Women and girls face gender-based violence as a result of their interaction with technology tools or online platforms. One participant said

“Men use to initiate conversation online with women, send unsolicited messages or even require to be giving out their pictures; if they deny the next to follow is harassment and intimidation. This makes them to be afraid of postings with their real pictures and been regular online.”

A participant who came from Borno state said, “Security issues such as activities of insurgents in some northern states play significant roles as most of the free internet centers were destroyed by insurgents, this is preventing people from not only accessing the internet but the western education at whole.”

As with the analysis of risks, religious leaders maintained that fear of pornographic videos, negative influences from the ‘west’ and inappropriate or ‘unislamic’ content continue to spread fear in the mind of many women and girls and result in families not allowing their daughters to be on the net.
Mechanisms and channels of improving digital literacy among women and girls

Interviews with participants have elicited an extensive list of strategies and platforms that will aid the promotion of technology utilization among women and girls in Northern Nigeria. Additionally, responses across all participants revealed a couple of ongoing interventions in various Northern Nigerian states that have made significant contributions in addressing issues pertinent to the prevailing gender digital divide among women and girls. These strategies and interventions are discussed in the following sub-themes: Development and effective implementation of gender-specific policies, Promotion of accessibility, Capacity building and skills development, and Development of awareness programs.

**Development and effective implementation of gender-specific policies**

Specific to interviewees recruited from the government, emphasis was made on how poor development and implementation of governmental policies have served as a major factor that has resulted in poor use of technology among women and girls. The Government related participants therefore made significant suggestions on improving the presence of women and girls on digital spaces through strengthening and reforming existing policies pertinent to technology utilization across all settings in Northern Nigeria. This finding was re-echoed during interviews with a few participants from Non-governmental organizations, highlighting the need for government to invest more on the use of technology.

It was also noted that polices have to be implemented in the initial stages and processes of project planning, that will incorporate gender concerns to ensure that the needs and priorities of women and young girls are aptly considered. In addition, interviewees stressed on the need to effectively implement a policy that will advocate for a more proactive approach to ensure gender-balanced participation in projects considering the limited pool of women that are proficient in digital related skills. A government representative narrated:
“There are projects, a lot of them even from my office, but you see that most of the people involved are men because there are no policies that will stress on how important it is for women to be involved and that way there is no encouragement [...] so if the government can make it clear that it is equally important for women and young girls to get the knowledge on how to use the internet, I think it will be good”.

Promotion of accessibility

Another suggestion that was frequently mentioned by a substantial number of interviewees was the need to make technology accessible to women and girls especially in rural and low-income settings. Suggestions made on accessibility promotion mainly took the form of provision of services and technology devices that are affordable to individuals in low-income settings, availability of internet services, provision of digital infrastructure in locations that can be accessed easily, availability of less-complicated smart phones that can be navigated easily by individuals with a low level of literacy and making public internet facilities convenient and safe for women and girls. Additionally, it is imperative to note that a few participants from both governmental and non-governmental organizations suggested that there is need to direct more efforts towards promoting accessibility in low-income settings, and populations of disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable women and girls affected by the highly prevalent violence and insecurity in Northern Nigeria.

“ [...] the government should spread round, even further to rural areas than urban and provide facilities where women can use the internet. ... mtn and airtel should set their [services] in rural areas more because it is only in the local government headquarters that you find mobile services”

“If you want these women to advance and be able to use technology, then provide the facilities and even the phones for them, and also electricity because all these technologies need electricity”

Capacity building and skills development
A key strategy that was perceived to be the most effective means of addressing the issue of poor utilization of technology by women and girls involved addressing the issue of illiteracy by providing qualitative education to girls from the elementary level and providing digital skills acquisition training for women and girls in both rural and urban settings. Digital skills including ability to navigate through computers and smartphones, use of social media platforms to promote businesses, using internet to acquire other skills such as cooking, and use of internet for educational purposes such as research were perceived to be most helpful for women and girls and therefore should be the target of interventions. Also, computer schools and development centers in rural settings were thought to be the ideal place for women and girls to acquire such skills. This means of promoting technology utilization has been included, directly and indirectly, in a number of ongoing projects from a range of interested parties including the US Embassy, United States Agency for International Development and Ministry of Women Affairs. However, it was suggested that there is need for the government and subsequent projects from other organizations to extend their interventions and focus more on remote settings considering that residents of urban settings have been the main target over the years. A few participants provided details of their ongoing projects which were narrated as:

“The USAID focuses on empowering individuals on the elementary level by providing various sources of education. With that it is indirectly influencing the use of technology because with education, promoting the use of technology becomes more feasible”

“We [Ministry of Women Affairs] try to create women centers in local governments. We go into primitive areas to invite women to join our development centers. It is like a school where we teach women various skills through vocational training. That is where we are beginning to introduce use of technology”.

“Private companies like Intel assist in providing digital literacy skills with beneficiaries summing up to 5 million women and girls across Nigeria”.

*Development of awareness programs*
As mentioned in the section reporting barriers to technology utilization, lack of awareness is a major factor that impedes the use of technology among women and girls. It was therefore primarily proposed by a considerable number of participants from all groups, that awareness programs should be introduced and extended to remote settings with the goal of enlightening the entire population on the relevance of utilizing technology by women and girls. One participant stressed on the need to not only promote awareness but to further highlight and counter the occurrence of other barriers such as misconceptions and fear of related risks. Overall, an important finding was a point made by a few participants on the reason for the failure of existing projects in promoting awareness on technology utilization among women and girls. Namely that interventions solely targeted at women and girls requiring the technology often excluded other individuals in the society that are responsible for supporting those women and girls in acquiring digital literacy. It was therefore suggested that awareness programs should include husbands, fathers and traditional leaders in addressing the constraint of lack of awareness, considering that they play a role in supporting and influencing the decisions of women and girls regarding the use of and access to technology.

“[...] in northern Nigeria if you want a program to be effective for a woman you will have to do sensitization for her husband and father so that they would know what they are getting their girls and women into, they would know that yes, they are doing this to acquire digital literacy, make them understand that such programs will only be for their benefit. if you do that then she will be allowed and well-supported”.

Lastly, suggestions made on the key areas that will be the focus of awareness initiatives were mainly: importance of technology in empowering women and girls, risks associated with the use of technology and how to tackle them, the role of technology in propagating religious practices and the role of technology for educational purposes.

**General Perception towards access to technology by women and girls**
Interviews with participants have elicited varying perceptions that were expressed on both personal and societal levels. With regard to the personal views, all participants thought the use of technology was essential in promoting various aspects of livelihood among women and girls, hence expressing that it has become imperative to ensure overall access to technology in Northern Nigeria. Although it was noted that certain risks are associated with the use of technology among women and girls, the related benefits were thought to supersede the occurrence of such risks especially when it is related to women’s’ financial empowerment. Some participants explained:

“The use of technology is very important for women and even girls too, I cannot even begin to express how important this is, anyone that is against the use of technology is not well-informed about the wonders it does”.

“[…] technology has benefited me personally in a lot of ways and that is why I think it should be promoted […] even now before I came for this interview I goggled some points that will help me answer your questions better”.

On the other hand, the societal views regarding the use of technology were thought to be relative by a majority of interviewees who described various scenarios of how personalities, environment and orientation of different individuals in a society has yielded varying perceptions regarding the use of technology by women and girls. It was generally assumed that people who are “conservative” and “traditional” tend to hold strong negative views regarding the use of technology by women and girls, with particular reference to morality. One interviewee summed up the divergent views by highlighting how society as a whole saw the use of technology from two distinct angles which were named “educational perspective” and “cultural perspective”. It was further explained that people who view technology from the “educational perspective” tend to have positive views regarding the use of technology. Whereas, people that adopt the “cultural perspective” are quick to condemn the use of technology among women and girls due to the negative perceptions they hold. In some, although not all, cases this divide was clarified based on whether a person was from an urban or rural setting.
“People in the society that think it is good to use technology see the users as advanced, educated and working-class people while others think people that use technology as if they are doing something bad. In some cases, they see them as uncultured especially if they use it in public places”.

“In rural areas people that have smart phones are seen as oppressors because not everybody in the villages has expensive phones. Sometimes they even see them as prostitutes because they think that is the only way girls can have money to buy such big phones”.

**Family/community control over girl's access to use of technology**

Even though access and use of technology and the internet by women and girls as maintained by this research respondents is beneficial, families and community members were still cautioned to exercise certain levels of control over women and girl’s access to technology to ensure the usage does not result in either harm, immoral practice or strip the women and girls of their values or norms. Some respondents described allowing women and girls to use smart phones and access the internet as a welcome development, yet they still believed monitoring what especially the girls do with smart phones is imperative considering the social vices online and the fear that the girls may be victims of harassment and bullying. One respondent said he allowed his daughters to use smart phones but constantly monitors them to ensure sure they don’t use it at midnight because when they use their phones at midnight they don’t observe morning prayer or leave for school on time.

Sexual harassment, bullying, rape, intimidation and fraud cases being witnessed on the internet according to some respondents are part of the reasons even parents, husbands, brothers that allow their wives, daughters or sisters use smart phone to access the internet are to certain extent skeptical and monitor use of the gadgets and the online presence to shield the subjects from unwanted experience. As one respondent puts it,

> “Now terrorism and all sorts of ill practices are advocated and promoted on the internet, and uninformed teens, male or female are the target. There are parents who don’t allow
their daughters to either use smart phones, access the internet or they do so under control in the case of liberal parents”.

Societal attitudes towards girls/women access to technology

Responses elicited from participants revealed that some individuals in the society accept the use of technology by women and girls as long as they would use it positively to make positive impact in their lives, and to enhance their literacy level, and boost their entrepreneur and business skills adequately. Nonetheless, people who are more concerned about the negative use of internet especially among young girls that access immoral websites tend to condemn the use of technology among women and girls.

Religious and traditional leaders were generally tagged as individuals that hold negative views regarding the use of technology and in most cases are often responsible for condemning utilization in rural settings. They were said to usually complain of immoral attitudes of girls and women that access the internet due to alien/foreign behaviors they adopt and bring back into the community, hence influencing other people. Some respondents explained the negative attitudes of religious and traditional leaders to be a function of the way the internet is mostly utilized. They narrated:

“These days a lot of women and girls are involved in various WhatsApp groups that do not benefit them in any way rather they discuss a lot of things that are immoral”.

“That the internet is an avenue to access immoral sites like pornography and social vices as well as cybercrime (hackers)”.

Meanwhile some respondent said that both the literate and illiterate parents don’t want their girls to become too attached to the internet. They revolt in saying it spoils their minds, it distracts them from studies especially when the girls are too indebted with this technology. To be more precise, a respondent explained:
“The mothers usually complain of the girls being so much in love with their phones that they are never attentive to their mothers ...because of the flair for internet browsing girls lack concentration”.

Societal influence on the use of technology by women and girls

The role of influential people in various settings in Northern Nigeria in determining the success of interventions was well acknowledged by a majority of the participants in this study. However, some disparities between rural and urban settings were noted in terms of the nature of individuals or groups in the community that are likely to influence the opinions of the people. Specific to rural settings, participants stressed on the impact of developing partnerships with traditional and religious leaders in ensuring that interventions are effectively implemented and goals are adequately met. A participant from the government further explained this as:

“If you look at the way the village people live, they give them respect, so because of that respect anything they say is seen as something very important. If you allow traditional leaders to be involved in this project then it may succeed. Let’s take an example, like polio immunization. It succeeded because of traditional leaders”.

“[…] you will have to involve traditional and religious leaders so that they can come in with their lectures. You need to educate these decision formers on the importance and disadvantages and train them on how to avoid risks, then it will be a step forward. People will understand the benefits are more than the risks”.

On the other hand, a few participants who were mostly teachers or have had experience teaching girls emphasized on the role of school teachers in having a positive influence on the use of technology by young girls in urban settings. A participant went ahead to further explain this owing to the fact that schools are generally considered a place where morality and character of young girls is developed and therefore parents tend to support any form of influence by teachers. It was therefore suggested that projects initiated to promote the use of technology among young girls
should develop partnerships with teachers in schools to incorporate digital knowledge acquisition into students’ curriculum.

“The schools can be very influential too. Young girls come back home to tell their parents what they have been taught in school. We can encourage them in schools to use technology then the girls go to tell their parents and this has impact in improving the use of technology because the parents will support their children because it is school related”.

Promoting use of technology by women and girls through technology

The participants suggested that Radio Programs could be useful and serve as a tool for advocacy in promoting access to technology for entire families, including women and girls. They admitted that radio programs that promote access to technology for entire families, including women and girls appear to be very effective. Precisely, it was noted that radio as a medium of mass communication has the power to reach a diverse set of people due to the scope of coverage, and potential of having a greater impact on the audience regardless of their place of residence. A respondent narrated that:

“Radio programs have power to affect not only education but also culture, religion and personal thoughts and beliefs of the people. While radio can be used as form of entertainment, in addition, it can assist in the quick mobilization in promoting girls access to technology, especially use of internet and smart phones”.

When asked to suggest the type of information to include in the radio programs, some of the interviewees said it will be important to include significance of good governance because good governance is accompanied by numerous benefits. “It is through good governance that we better manage our resources, provide equal access to opportunities including using the internet”. as one respondent stated, “No Power, No IT”. All of the participants agreed that the opinion of the public figures in the community, such as religious leaders, traditional leaders, computer experts and business men, women and girls, and other important stakeholders will be very relevant. Because it is the collective responsibility of everyone; to take people to the promise land.
Religious views on use of technology by women and girls

Both moderate and conservative religious leaders interviewed had positive views regarding the use of internet by women and girls in the context of Northern Nigeria. It was explicitly noted that this wasn’t the case initially in the late 90’s, where Islamic Scholars issued Fatwas on the use of the internet for both men and women. The use of the internet especially in public centers was totally condemned, after noticing that youth were trooping to the cafes to access pornographic sites. Nonetheless, with increasing awareness of the benefits of technology in recent times, positive views have become universal among religious scholars all over the world, which was initiated by the realization of the enormous benefits that accompany the use of technology, which were perceived to outweigh the risks associated. The positive views and efforts to promote the use of technology by religious leaders were initiated by the fact that the internet promotes equal opportunities for people to have access to religious content on the internet such as Quranic recitations, and public lectures on YouTube. As one respondent narrated:

“Religious scholars that supported condemning the use of technology especially among youth later developed interest on the net because many Islamic sites were published where various Islamic books were uploaded. From that they understood that this internet is not totally bad, you can use it for religious purpose”.

Regardless, all of the religious leaders interviewed perceived that the use of smart phones and the internet must be regulated. From their point of view and understanding of the internet from a religious frame work, they felt there was absolutely nothing immoral with regard to using technology as long as utilization is regulated in terms of time, situation and frequency of utilization. The use of internet was described to have double edges which generally extend toward the negative or positive aspects of it. As a result, religious leaders are sometimes flexible, sometimes aggressive, while sometimes indifferent depending upon the situation involved. However, emphases were placed on how crucial it is to maintain a balance that favors utilization of technology in a positive manner. A participant explained this on a more personal level, demonstrating his personal use of the internet to be moderate, trying not to get carried away and
too indulged in the negative aspect of it, and at the same time taking advantage of the benefits it offers. The use of internet in that aspect was generally perceived to be the most appropriate way of using the internet by individuals in the society, and hence should be promoted.

“The use of internet in a negative way can never be supported. If you use it to rob a bank, if you use it to hawk someone’s account, to steal from someone all these are bad. But if you use it to share information globally regardless of whether you are man or woman, no one can say what you did is a bad”.

The participants emphasized that Islam is an egalitarian religion that always promotes equality and having access to knowledge, regardless of your society, gender and other personalities. In Islam, personalities, social background and financial status tend to be irrelevant, it is what you stand for that matters. This point was made to stress on the role of Islam in promoting equal access to education regardless of the gender of individuals. A participant quoted a verse from the Noble book (Qur’an) in support of this view:

“The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give charity and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will have mercy upon them, for Allah is Almighty and Wise”.

Additionally, a participant pointed out the Hadith of Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, which states:

“The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, then he is most deserving of it”.

These religious quotes were found to be the major drivers that initiated the perception that women and girls should have equal opportunity to acquire digital knowledge. Precisely, emphases were made on how Islam does not place a barrier between males and females in term of seeking knowledge. Anything that is unlawful for women will also be unlawful for men. It is obligatory upon everybody in Islam to seek for knowledge anywhere in the world irrespective of their gender.
“There is no any religious justification that might stop women and girls accessing and using the technology. Islam allows the use of the internet for positive change and no barrier in seeking knowledge in Islam”.

Governmental and Non-governmental organizations’ views on the use of technology among women and girls

Representatives from a wide range of governmental and non-governmental organizations including the US Embassy and Human Rights commission among others expressed their views regarding the utilization of technology among women and girls in northern Nigeria. Participants perceived that the technological revolution appear to be by-passing women, with individuals residing in rural settings of this region carrying the highest burden. Regardless of this prevailing issue, neither adequate research nor practical projects have been directed towards addressing the prevailing issue of the gender digital divide in Northern Nigeria, hence failing to address the issue significantly.

“They are only providing computers in schools and majority women and girls do not have access to schools to begin with. Apart from the schools there is no public place that somebody can walk in to have access to internet for free. for now, the government is doing way less”.

Responses from majority of the participants postulated that the propagation of this issue and lack of sufficient efforts to address it is coupled with its stance in terms of relevance to the government and related organizations, and the society as a whole. Precisely, promotion of the use of technology is generally not considered as a top priority in Northern Nigeria. Rather, targeting and addressing other issues that were considered to be ‘life threatening’ as described by a respondent were thought to be key issues that are given utmost relevance in various organizations.

“I won’t call it a top priority, we are focusing on violence extremism so promoting peace and security is our priority based on my portfolio, but technology certainly features in a lot of our programs”.

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Regardless of the perceptions of participants which were inclined towards the irrelevance of prioritizing the promotion of technology utilization among women and girls, it was generally noted that it will be beneficial to the entire society if the use of technology becomes universal in Northern Nigeria. This view was accompanied by the belief that the benefits of utilizing technology supersede the risks associated, and hence the use of technology should be promoted. Contrarily, one participant was against the promotion of technology utilization in rural settings. He suggested that all efforts should be directed towards addressing the issue in urban settings. He further described the promotion of technology utilization in rural settings as a ‘waste of time’. To be more precise, he narrated:

‘Even in the urban area this thing with technology is not accepted by the majority, how can you take it to rural areas where they are mostly illiterate. Even the general western education is not yet acceptable talk less of technology, there is no way you can break that perception, you have to leave them the way they are’.

Lastly, participants generally expressed positive perception towards the project initiated to tackle the issue of gender digital divide by Equal Access Initiative. They believed the project will assist in bridging the gap that is responsible for poor utilization of technology among women and girls in Northern Nigeria. Additionally, it was noted that this project will play an important role in supporting a wide-range of related programs proposed by various governmental and non-governmental organizations including the US embassy, United States Agency for International Development, and the Federal and State government.

“Equal access is our [US Embassy] very strong partner here in Nigeria, if we have an ongoing grant that is related to this project then there is room for collaboration or bringing the stakeholders together to share valuable information”.

“You see even currently the way we [Humans Right Commission] receive complaints is through our website, if people know how to go through this process or are educated to do so, they are given the chance to voice out their complaints”.
Conclusion

The world can’t move without technology and technological devices have eased the way things are not only for the women and girls but to the generality of the society. Rather than allow fear, cultural and societal perception to hinder women and girls from benefitting from numerous opportunities that access to the internet and smart phones offer, parents, community and religious leaders, youth, civil society and other stakeholders should embrace, promote and emphasize the use of technology through sustained awareness creation. There is much benefit to be reaped from use of technology. Bridging gender digital divide is a step towards giving women and girls a voice and pushing for societal progress in general. In the use of internet there is a convenient and free learning space which requires little or no financial commitment from users.