E-Government for Women's Empowerment in Asia and the Pacific

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

As governments transition towards e-government in Asia and the Pacific, there is growing acknowledgement of the role that e-government could play to harness ICTs for women's empowerment and gender equality. However, much of e-government policy and implementation still do not take into account the differentiated access to, and impact of, technology for men and women. Recognizing the potential of e-government for women's empowerment, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) undertook a project in 2014–2015 on "E-Government for Women's Empowerment in the Asia Pacific", in partnership with the United Nations Project Office on Governance (UNPOG). The project aims to enhance knowledge and awareness of good practices of gender-responsive policies, programmes and strategies in e-government, in order to help build the capacity of governments to harness this tool towards women's empowerment.

An institutional analysis of e-government and women's empowerment

The intrinsic link between e-government and good governance requires that any study of e-government and women's empowerment examine both the technical dimensions of digitalized public administration and services, as well as the political goal of women's empowerment and gender equality, through the lens of good governance. The study therefore posited that e-government can be considered gender-responsive if it meets the tenets of good governance, including promoting transparent, accountable and inclusive institutions and services, as well as its gender dimensions. The study addressed the following questions to look at how e-government norms, rules and practices impact institutional shifts towards gender equality and women's empowerment:

1   What new norms are introduced (in e-government systems) with the introduction of technology? How are emerging norms impacting women's empowerment and gender equality?

2   What are the new rules legitimizing the structures and procedures of e-government? Do they have a legislative mechanism? How do they impact women's empowerment and gender equality?

3   What new, everyday practices and cultures of interaction between state and citizen are evident with the introduction of technology? How do they impact women's empowerment and gender equality?

Focusing on the three key components of e-government: service delivery, citizen uptake and connectivity infrastructure, the study adopted an institutional analysis framework to examine the state of play with respect to e-government policies and interventions in five countries (Australia, Fiji, India, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea), and conducted a deeper analysis of twelve good practices across these countries.

Ingredients of a gender-responsive ecosystem

The findings of the study indicate that gender-responsive e-government policies and programmes require the following key ingredients.

Service delivery

- Balance between digital processes and human mediation
- Robust governance of emerging boundary spanning arrangements in service delivery
- Investments in both data and connectivity capacities
- Gender-responsive data governance to balance transparency and privacy

Citizen uptake

- Technology design that aims to expand women's choices and engagement in government structures
- Frontline workers to nurture women's appreciation for, and trust in, digitalized service delivery
- Leadership of national women's machineries to encourage gender-responsive e-government
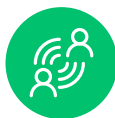
Connectivity

- Models to promote meaningful online participation for women
- Subsidized access and safe public spaces for including all women

E-government as an innovative tool to achieve women's empowerment

The country cases suggest that gender-responsive e-government interventions lead to many positive outcomes for gender equality. They enhance women's self-esteem, enable women to challenge traditional norms and build peer connections, boost their confidence to participate in the job market, bring them vital information on entitlements, and give them access to mechanisms of redress. They also transform public institutions, making them technically and politically more capable of delivering gender inclusive services.

The move to digital by default in public service delivery must therefore be seen not merely as a shift in tools used by governments. E-government is increasingly a sine qua non of sound public administration that expands the meaning of good governance, giving governments the wherewithal to reach out to, and promote the rights of, women. E-government can and should be seen as a creative policy instrument to achieve the normative goal of women's empowerment.

The findings of the study also indicate that:

- Gender-responsive practices in e-government depend on strong norms and rules, but institutionalizing gender in e-government also entails wider changes in public institutional cultures and human resource capacities.

- Where there are gender mainstreaming laws and policies and gender budgeting rules, the institutionalization of gender in e-government design and implementation is stronger.

- Well-designed e-government strategies not only tackle women's exclusion from development services, but also give them the space to participate in shaping development agenda.

The study hence calls upon governments to explicitly adopt gender e-government policy vision and plans, and recommends that the following actions be undertaken with regard to the norms, rules and practices governing the areas of service delivery, citizen uptake and connectivity. These suggestions are aimed to help institutions implementing e-government to foster the required normative and institutional shifts towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

Summary of Recommendations

	Service delivery	Citizen Uptake	Connectivity
NORMS	• Promote e-government as a public policy instrument for pro-poor, gender-sensitive development • Guarantee women's digital citizenship • Ensure that gender and e-government policies go hand-in-hand • Balance effectively technology and human elements in service delivery design	• Guarantee women's rights to fully participate in the information society	• Promote universal access to the Internet
RULES	• Formulate clear rules to cushion e-services from political volatility • Institutionalize the partnership between national women's machinery and e-government agency • Promote robust governance of Public Private Partnerships in service delivery • Support open data frameworks that promote the right to information • Develop gender-responsive open standards for public data architectures	• Ensure that online citizen engagement is tied to women's 'right to be heard' • Actively involve women not only in implementation, but also design and co-production of e-government services	• Deploy multiple policy instruments towards universalizing Internet access • Make connectivity policies gender-responsive
PRACTICES	• Build awareness and capacity of e-government officials on gender issues • Monitor e-government through a 'digital citizenship index' • Promote effective management of metadata of individuals • Invest in partnerships with public interest intermediaries in open data initiatives	• Promote digital literacy as a strategic pathway to women's citizenship	• Promote the effective use of mobile phones in citizen outreach • Catalyze meaningful cultures of use through a public access, telecentre model

1 **Setting
the scene**