

Closing the Digital Gender Divide

Policy Recommendations for Safe and Equitable Digital Access in Sri Lanka



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Executive Summary

Women, girls, and gender minorities in Northern Province face structural and social barriers that limit meaningful participation in digital spaces. This policy brief draws on evidence from seven Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, and Mullaitivu under the BRIDGE Project implemented by the Chrysalis, partnering with the Law and Society Trust.

The findings identify key barriers, including poor digital infrastructure, restrictive laws, patriarchal norms, low digital literacy, cybersecurity risks, and online gender-based violence (OGBV). These challenges are shaped by the region's post-conflict context and intersecting inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and class.

The brief calls for targeted, gender-responsive policy action to ensure safer, more equitable, and inclusive digital access in the Northern Province.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on primary qualitative research conducted from April 16 to April 19, 2024, as part of the BRIDGE Project by the Law and Society Trust partnering with Chrysalis. Seven focus group discussions (FGDs) were held across five districts in the Northern Province, with each group consisting of 8 to 10 participants, including journalists, social media influencers, and civil society activists. The structured discussions addressed six key thematic areas: participation and engagement; representation and identity; social norms and online culture; intersectional issues; safety and

security; and platform design and policies.

Secondary evidence was drawn from global frameworks, including the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024, the UN Women CSW 2022 report, UNICEF's literature on the gender digital divide, and the ITU Facts and Figures report from 2019. The policy frameworks referenced include Sri Lanka's Online Safety Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the Computer Crimes Act of 2007, and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act of 2007.

Background & Context

Sri Lanka's digital transformation began in the 1980s and accelerated in the mid-1990s with telecommunications liberalization, leading to significant advancements (Gunawardene, 2017). 13.9 million individuals were using the internet in Sri Lanka at the end of 2025, when online penetration stood at 59.7 percent (DataReportal, 2026). However, these gains are unevenly distributed, especially in the Northern Province, which still faces challenges from a 30-year civil conflict, including poor infrastructure, military presence, ethnic

marginalization of Tamil communities, and entrenched patriarchal norms.

The global digital gender divide, particularly in conflict-affected regions, remains significant. The GSMA (2024) reports a 19% mobile internet gender gap in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) as of 2022, with 310 million fewer women online. In South Asia, the mobile phone ownership gender gap is 23% (GSMA, 2020), with women facing particular barriers due to intersecting vulnerabilities like low income and rural residency.

Moreover, the absence of gender-disaggregated data on digital services and infrastructure in the Northern Province complicates evidence-based policy making.

This brief seeks to fill this gap by turning focus group discussion (FGD) insights into actionable policy recommendations.

Key Findings

Barrier Area	Key Findings	Most Affected Group	Impact Level
Infrastructure and Access Inequality	Strong urban-rural connectivity gaps persist, with weaker network coverage and high device costs limiting access in underserved districts. Device-sharing reduces privacy and digital autonomy.	Rural women, low-income households	Critical
Cultural Norms and Self-Censorship	Patriarchal norms, community surveillance, and religious scrutiny restrict women's online visibility and participation, often leading to self-censorship and withdrawal.	Women, Muslim women, LGBTQIA+ individuals	Critical
Restrictive Laws and Surveillance	Digital laws and state surveillance instill fear in journalists, activists, and communities, hindering freedom of expression and online civic engagement due to a lack of transparency and trust in the enforcement of these laws.	Journalists, activists, Tamil communities	Critical
Cybersecurity and OGBV	Low digital safety awareness increases vulnerability to scams, fake accounts, harassment, and online gender-based violence. AI-driven abuse is an emerging threat.	Women activists, transgender persons, female politicians	High
Digital Literacy and Platform Accessibility	Limited understanding of privacy, security, and advocacy tools, along with language barriers and inaccessible platform policies, including costs, increases exclusion.	Rural women, older women, non-English speakers	High

Policy Gaps Analysis

Policy Area	Existing Framework	Implementation Gap
Gender-responsive digital governance	National Digital Policy GovTech Sri Lanka mandate	No gender-disaggregated digital data; no gender quotas in ICT policy design
Cybersecurity legislation	Computer Crimes Act 2007 Online Safety Act	Overreach criminalises legitimate expression; disproportionate impact on minorities
Online safety for women/LGBTQIA+	ICCPR Act 2007 Penal Code	Limited accessibility and responsiveness of platform reporting and grievance mechanisms in Sinhala and Tamil
Digital infrastructure equity	e-Sri Lanka Nenasala - Arivahams (telecentres)	Telecentres are largely absent in the North; rural connectivity investment is insufficient

Digital literacy & education	School curricula (limited ICT)	No cybersecurity in curriculum; no gender-sensitive digital literacy programmes
Representation in policy design	Ministry of Digital Economy	Women and minorities are absent from ICT policymaking; no Northern Province voice
Freedom of expression online	Right to Information Act 2016 ICCPR	Prevention of Terrorism Act and Online Safety Act produce chilling effects; Tamil memorial suppression is ongoing

Recommendations

- **Strengthen gender-responsive digital policy and governance**
Integrate gender-disaggregated and inclusion-focused data standards into Sri Lanka's proposed National Data Exchange (NDX) framework to strengthen evidence-based digital policymaking and ensure representation of women, ethnic minorities, and marginalized groups, with particular attention to the Northern Province.
- **Expand equitable digital infrastructure and access**
Prioritize affordable connectivity, improved broadband infrastructure, and safe community digital access points in underserved districts such as Mannar, Kilinochchi, and Mullaitivu, alongside device subsidy programmes for low-income women.
- **Enhance digital literacy and community safety mechanisms**
Scale effective and holistic community-based digital literacy programmes focused on cybersecurity, privacy, online gender-based violence (OGBV), and safe reporting pathways, prioritizing rural women, journalists, and LGBTQIA+ communities.
- **Reform legal and platform accountability systems**
Review restrictive digital laws to safeguard freedom of expression, while requiring digital platforms to strengthen context-driven local-language moderation, improve transparency and effectiveness of reporting systems, and address online harassment, hate speech, and deepfake abuse.
- **Invest in long-term research and advocacy support**
Support sustained research, documentation, and advocacy on digital exclusion, OGBV, and content suppression, while integrating digital safety into broader gender equality, civic engagement, and post-conflict recovery programmes.

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