



CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

THE PROBLEM

While the gender digital divide continues to shrink globally, there remains a significant gap in access across sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana, this divide is particularly pronounced in rural areas, with women facing significant barriers to Internet access due to socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors. Connectivity is further hindered by the region's large coverage gaps, as most rural areas lack the necessary infrastructure to facilitate Internet access. This digital divide disproportionately affects women and girls, and they miss out on the benefits of digital resources that could potentially improve their social and economic well-being.

THE PROJECT

To increase meaningful Internet access and provide new opportunities for women, the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative partnered with Bluetown, an Internet service provider in Ghana, to bring connectivity to three rural areas—Adonkwanta, Akode, and Supreso—and two semi-urban areas—Kyebi and Koforidua. Through their cost-effective Internet infrastructure solutions, Bluetown is working to achieve three main objectives:

1. Provide and enhance access to Internet connectivity
2. Facilitate an enabling environment for women to gain Internet access in their communities
3. Offer social and economic opportunities for women and girls through access to digital services, content, and training

By expanding networks in Ghana's rural and semi-urban areas, the project increases Internet access and addresses the cultural and societal barriers that may prevent women from connecting to the Internet. In order to gain a deeper understanding of each community's needs, Bluetown established partnerships with organizations familiar with the local context. In rural areas, Bluetown partnered with The Hunger Project (THP), a global, non-profit organization focused on building community-based mobilization programs through a strategy of targeting areas called "Epicenters" and helping them transition into self-sufficient communities.

Using these established Epicenters, Bluetown introduced Community Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Centers (CICs), which are public spaces where community members can access the Internet, computers, and workspaces, and receive ICT support from trained local representatives at each center. Members gain access to educational digital content at no cost through the THP Portal, a resource hosted by the Bluetown Local Cloud that contains information on health, nutrition, farming, financial management, and women's reproductive and legal rights. The Bluetown model also offers lease-to-own mobile phone purchase plans, allowing women and girls to fully own the devices in six to twelve months and access the Internet from their homes.

Similarly in semi-urban areas, Bluetown partnered with the Ghana Investment Fund for Electronic Communication (GIFEC) to establish CICs. The women in these areas are mostly recent college graduates, entrepreneurs, and business owners who have prior digital knowledge, but want to learn to use digital tools to advance their job prospects and economic opportunities. The project conducted a series of workshops on employment, job seeking,

digital marketing, and business management to encourage women to fully participate in the digital economy and explore new avenues to earn an income. These workshops were designed and delivered with local partners and subject matter experts, including the Girls in Excellence Movement (GEM), an organization that focuses on empowering girls by providing trainings in STEM; Circumspecte, an African digital platform and development consultancy; and JidiTrust, an organization focused on facilitating the growth of small businesses in Africa.

THE RESULTS

Through the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, Bluetown continues to bridge the gender digital divide in Ghana. With its targeted initiatives to increase connectivity, the project reached 6,408 women and girls between May 2021 and December 2022 through the CICs, training programs, and the Bluetown Local Cloud.

Female participants reported using the resources in various applications, including access to information that affects their health and well-being. Barikisu Mensah, a nurse at Abukawa health directorate, said, “When it comes to Internet access, men are more privileged than us women. Women mostly use phones, which cannot even access the Internet. Today [Bluetown’s launch event] marks the wake of a new dawn and I believe more women can now purchase phones to access information to support pregnancy, motherhood issues, and everything that concerns women. There is valuable information from Bluetown’s free local cloud.” This is just one of the many ways the centers have been used to create an enabling environment for women’s digital inclusion.

As they plan for the sustainability of the project, Bluetown is exploring the possibility of converting the CICs into Internet centers, and the conference rooms into event spaces that can be accessed by paying a fee or rented. These funds would finance the center’s operations and enable Bluetown to continue to provide much-needed Internet access to these communities.

Bluetown’s work advances the overarching goal of the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative to bring meaningful connectivity to more women around the world. To learn more about the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, click [here](#).



Figures between May 2021 and Dec. 2022