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UNICEF Gender and Technology 2023
Building digital solutions with a gender lens

How to improve digital inclusion and accessibility for girls with disabilities

Girls and young women with disabilities face more barriers to digital inclusion compared to their peers, as the gender gap in digital adoption is amplified at the intersection with disability. Women and girls with disabilities are less likely to use a mobile phone or smartphone, because of challenges in digital access, accessibility, and usability. In addition, they generally have fewer opportunities to develop digital knowledge and skills and are less likely to understand mobile devices, their benefits, and how to use phone accessibility features.

Accessibility features are functions built-in to digital devices that can help improve the user experience for people with disabilities e.g., screen reader, magnify content, video subtitles, or control the device with voice commands.

Persons with disabilities are not all the same. Impairments can be classified as physical, sensory, psychosocial, learning, and intellectual – some maybe present from birth, while others may be acquired as the result of illness or injury. While impairments are often associated with restriction, people are generally "disabled" by attitudes and behaviours, as well as design that does not consider the diversity of human experience. To drive inclusion, it is essential to design accessible environments in collaboration with people with disabilities so that barriers may be removed and replaced with enablers for access and participation. This is important when thinking about digital spaces and the need for digital accessibility and inclusive design.

This guide highlights best practices in inclusion and accessibility of digital solutions for persons with disabilities, particularly girls. It aims to support developers and implementers of digital products and services, so that girls and young women with disabilities may benefit from digital services and platforms. For more information also see the evidence brief Accessible and inclusive digital solutions for girls with disabilities.
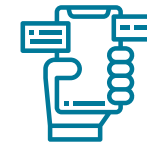
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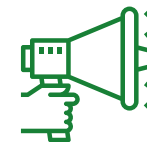**05. Learn about girls with disabilities' digital use**

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01. Work with disability allies

People with disabilities should be engaged in every phase of digital solution development. However, in many countries, girls (and boys) with disabilities are often invisible – they may be at home, live in institutions, and not participate in school or social activities. Developing relationships with local organizations whose members and beneficiaries are persons with disabilities will help reach girls with disabilities. These may be organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) or social enterprises and non-profit organizations focused on disability inclusion. Note that OPDs vary greatly. They may represent diverse groups (e.g., women with disabilities) or impairment specific groups (e.g., persons with deaf blindness); they can be local, national, regional, or international; and they may operate as individual or umbrella organizations.

Map out disability allies in your context to identify those working with girls with disabilities. Understand partners' digital expertise, such as in digital skilling of persons with disabilities and/or in improving accessibility of digital platforms. Local disability partners may support consultations and user testing, assess similar platforms, or raise awareness of a digital product/service. Partnering with OPDs can be particularly valuable for promoting the inclusion of girls with disabilities in digital solution development, ensuring that activities are responsive to their needs.

Case study
Plan International collaborates with the NORFIL Foundation

Plan Philippines worked with the NORFIL Foundation, a non-profit organization providing learning opportunities for children and youth with disabilities, when localizing the Oky app. NORFIL took a central role in organizing a consultation with girls with diverse impairments, providing an accessible venue, liaising with local OPDs to invite participants with disabilities, and supporting facilitation of the consultation.

02. Respect disability etiquette

The golden rule for interacting with someone who has a disability, is the same as interacting with anyone else - treat the person with kindness and respect and when in doubt, always ask. Every person with a disability has an individual experience of how their impairments affect them. It is important not to make assumptions on how they want to be treated, and to ask what they need in order to participate. This is particularly important when interventions involve digital technology which may come with multiple challenges and opportunities to improve the user experience.

Ensure information is accessible and uses appropriate, respectful, inclusive, and contextual language to describe disability and individuals with disabilities. Using the right terminology in written and oral communications can empower people with disabilities; using outdated and inappropriate terms will reinforce prejudice and discrimination. Following are a few examples (N.B. individuals and groups may have their own preferred terms).

Terms to avoid

handicapped/disabled

cripple/invalid

mentally defective/retarded

normal

Terms to use

person/people with disabilities

person/people with physical disabilities

person/people with intellectual disabilities

person/people without disabilities

03. Include girls with disabilities in consultations

In keeping with the principle of "nothing about us without us", initiatives must consult with girls with disabilities in decisions that affect their lives. These girls will be experts of their own situation and can provide invaluable feedback to develop a digital solution that meets their needs and wants. Work with disability allies to design, plan and implement inclusive and accessible consultations. This may include reaching out to potential participants, support for and training of facilitators on disability awareness and advice on accessibility. Ensure partners receive adequate support for their participation including timely information, capacity building and funding if available.

Consultations should be empowering, safe, and respectful, featuring meaningful dialogue, rather than being tokenistic. If well implemented this engagement can give girls with disabilities a voice, make them feel valued and increase their self-confidence. Children with disabilities may require caregiver assistance to participate, however it is important that young person's opinion is heard and not overshadowed by the adult. Ensure you gain free and informed consent from girls with disabilities (and their caregivers) before the consultations. Provide information they can understand about the meeting objectives, their role, potential risks and benefits, safeguarding measures, and their rights during the consultation, including their right to not participate or to withdraw at any time with no consequences. Girls' parents may need additional information to understand the relevance and benefits for their daughters and the safeguarding measures in place.

Safeguard girls with disabilities

Ensure girls are safe and protected from harm while in your care including safeguards to address circumstances where consent and confidentiality may be at risk such as during translation or sign language interpretation. Have a person dedicated to receiving and responding to any queries or concerns raised by girls during the consulation.

04. Host accessible events

Be conscious that meetings, either online or in-person, should be accessible for those who have a visible or invisible disability. Ask participants about their needs for accommodations, and check that all elements of consultations are accessible.

Communicate in a manner suited to those joining consultations, being aware that each participant may require different strategies and types of support:

- Discussion formats may need to be simplified so questions can be answered with simple responses (yes/no) or by pointing.

- Accessible formats may include braille, large and high contrast print (at minimum a plain 12-point font), audio, alternative text to describe images, digital formats compatible with screen readers, and sign language interpretation, If possible, use an independent interpreter rather than a family member who may filter responses.

- Ensure language is plainly written and inclusive and not discriminatory. Consider using easy-to-read text with simpler vocabulary and sentences for participants with varying levels of literacy or cognitive abilities.

- Sometimes, repetition of information may be necessary to sustain interest during consultations, overcome varying levels of understanding and differing information formats.

Tips for accessible events

UNICEF provides guidance for organizing of accessible events while AbilityNet and InclusionHub provide tips for hosting inclusive online meetings. For example, for online meetings, be flexible with camera options, disable chat to reduce distractions, provide slides in advance and turn on subtitles. For in-person consultations, make sure the venue is safe and accessible for everyone, including being step-free and having disability friendly toilets for those with mobility impairments. Smaller focus groups or 1:1 interviews with participants with the same type of impairment, may make consultations easier in terms of logistics.

05. Learn about girls with disabilities' digital use

Questions about digital use and behaviour should be adapted to learn about girls' range of experiences related to their impairments. It is important to understand their awareness and usage of digital platforms, digital skills and the challenges they face. For example, this could include their ability to use smartphones or tablets independently or with support; their understanding and use of device accessibility features (e.g., screen reader); and any websites, apps or social media they engage with.

06. Develop accessible and relevant digital content

To create an inclusive solution, content that is accessible and relevant to the target audience, including those with disabilities, is essential. Engage girls with disabilities not only in platform design, but also in content development. Content should include information relevant to local perceptions of disability, or challenges girls with disabilities may face related to the subject matter of the digital service or platform.

WCAG sets the standard for content accessibility

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) sets the standard for web and digital content accessibility. The underlying principles of the WCAG are that content must be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (compatible with browsers, assistive technologies, app requirements). There are three levels of WCAG conformance (A, AA, AAA). Level AAA is optimally accessible but not achievable for some types of content, so Level AA, which tackles the most common barriers for users with disabilities, is generally recommended. A website or app does not meet Level A may have serious accessibility issues that prevent use by people with disabilities.

Case study
Oky accessibility and digital inclusion of girls

Disability experts were engaged to support the Oky app to be accessible and inclusive. To comply with WCAG standards, button labels and alternative text for images were included. A tablet landscape version of the app was developed to allow enlarged screen content, easier navigation for children with limited upper body mobility and use on wheelchair mounted tablets. Avatars were developed to ensure representation of girls with disabilities, and specific content was created for girls and their caregivers e.g., how to manage periods if you are visually impaired, and how to support a girl with an intellectual disability during her menstruation.

Avatars created for and by girls with disabilities

07. User test with girls with disabilities

User testing of a digital solution should be carried out when the interface and content are ready, or when new features are added. Girls with disabilities can give their opinions of the user experience and content including language, tone of voice, ease of use, pain points, features they like best/least, and changes that could improve their experience. Use your learnings from consultations to also determine whether participants will require digital skills training prior to user testing.

08. Build girls with disabilities' digital skills

Digital skills training may be needed for girls with disabilities to provide feedback on digital products and services. For example, they may need to be introduced to digital device accessibility features such as:

- Voice control for opening applications and navigating menus,

- Screen readers,

- Magnify or zoom functions,

- Adjusting text size, colour and contrast,

- Turning on subtitles,

- Replacing button controls with gestures such as swipes and taps, and

- Connection to assistive technologies such as hearing aids, keyboards, braille devices etc.

Work with OPDs with expertise in digital training for persons with disabilities if they are available. If not, a local partner may be able to assist in building capacity of participants, with visual and hearing impairments, using online toolkits such as the upcoming Oky guide Teaching basic skills for the use of accessibility features, or the GSMA Mobile Internet Skills Training Toolkit module on accessibility features. Consider using a train-the-trainer approach, whereby those learning new digital skills are empowered to communicate this valuable information to their peers.

Case study
Local organization builds capacity in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the NGO Atriev seeks to transform the lives of people with visual impairments so they may access higher education and mainstream employment, and actively contribute to society. The organization offers online and in-person workshops with parents and children with disabilities to help them acquire skills to use assistive technology on their devices such as screen readers.

09. Ensure inclusive launch and marketing

When releasing an inclusive digital solution bring in participants and local partners, including OPDs and other disability advocates, to launch events and activations. Ensure the invitation, the event itself (whether online or offline), and any materials involved are accessible and that you have asked participants about any accommodations they may require to attend.

Disability allies should also be engaged to support inclusive marketing campaigns. Use inclusive language, and information preferences of girls with disabilities. For example, messaging platforms and text messages have been found to be effective for people with hearing impairments, but other audiences may prefer video or audio formats such as podcasts or radio campaigns. Inclusive marketing campaigns can be powerful in addressing discrimination and challenge norms and stereotypes around disability and gender. Ensure girls with disabilities are represented in marketing materials. Test campaign materials with girls with disabilities and their caregivers before finalising and leverage traditional and digital media to engage and broaden your reach.

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10. Inclusive monitoring and evaluation

Collecting data from girls with disabilities is vital to ensure their experiences and stories are heard. Use inclusive and accessible approaches for their meaningful engagement in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Work with OPD partners to discuss how girls with disabilities could best be included and ensure M&E activities and tools are accessible for your audience (see 04 Host accessible events for more). Train M&E facilitators on inclusive practices, disability etiquette, the use of positive terminology, building trust and communicating with girls with different types of disabilities. Any data collection should be tailored to girls' needs by asking what support they require to participate. As in any interaction with children, safeguarding during M&E is also essential for girls with disabilities. For more information, see this guide on M&E strategies for disability inclusion.

In-app surveys to reach users with disabilities

In-app surveys can be a direct and low cost means to receive feedback from users. Work with partner organizations to review the surveys' suitability for users with disabilities and their caregivers in your context. The Washington Group (WG) questionnaire, particularly the WG Short Set (WG-SS) can be helpful to obtain information on the difficulties users may have in undertaking basic functioning activities. The WG-SS includes questions about hearing, vision, mobility, dexterity, cognition, communication and self-care, as well as the respondent's emotional state. The longer WG-UNICEF Module on Child Functioning covers the same domains but has been designed for administration to primary caregivers.

Want to learn more? Check out these great resources:

Accessibility and inclusion for children with disabilities
- **Accessible and inclusive digital solutions for girls with disabilities** (UNICEF)
- **Toolkit on Accessibility** including **Organization of Accessible Events** (UNICEF)
- **Engaging children with disabilities in decisions** (UNICEF)
- **Consulting with children with disabilities** (Plan International)
- **Disability-inclusive child safeguarding** (Save the Children)

Accessible design and digital accessibility
- **Accessible design and development principles** (Web.dev)
- **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines** and **WCAG 2 Checklist** (World Wide Web Consortium)
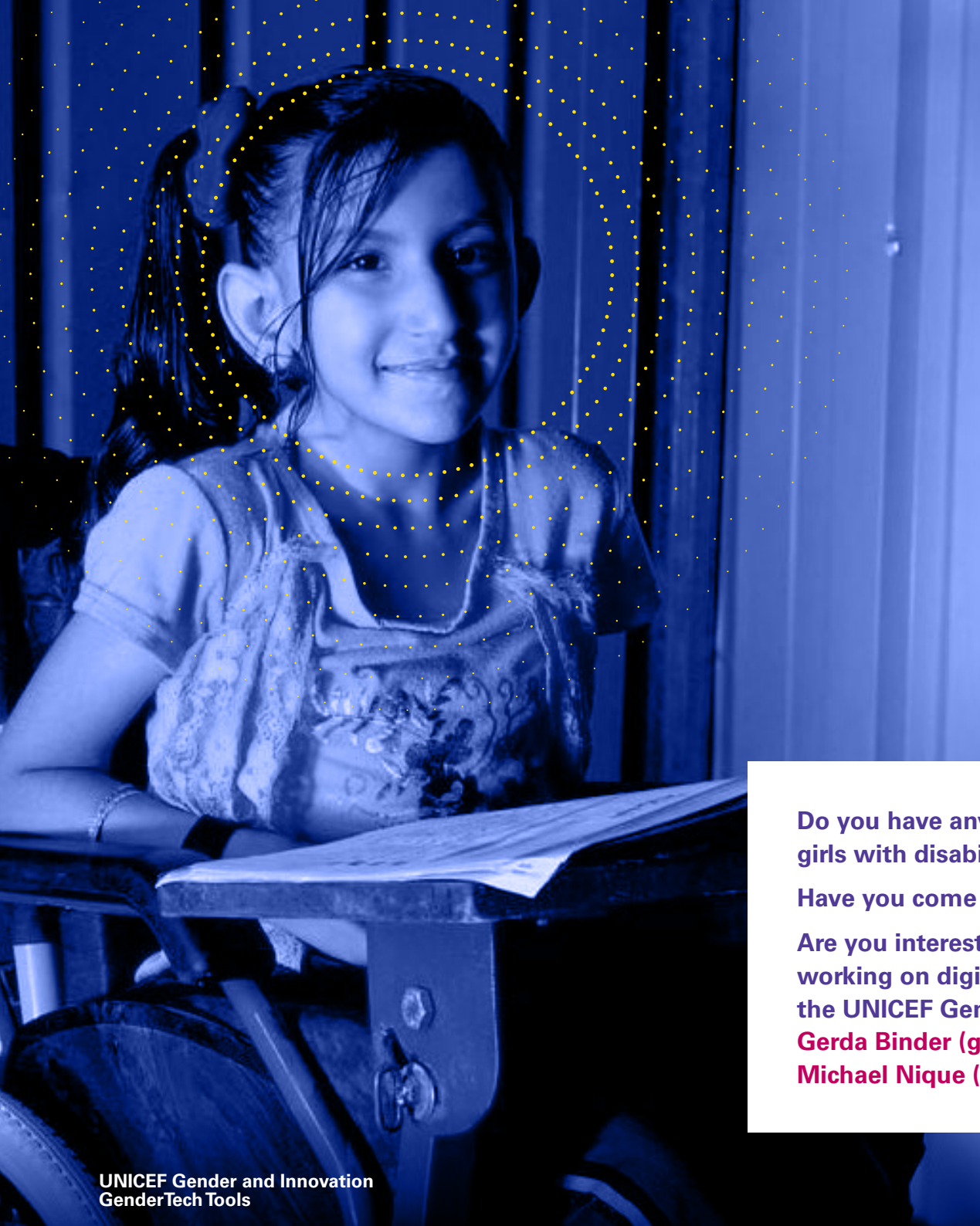
Phone accessibility settings
- **Google accessibility**
- **iPhone accessibility**
- **Samsung accessibility**

Marketing and social media
- **Inclusive marketing and social media** (Google)

Monitoring, evaluation and learning
- **Monitoring and evaluation strategies for disability inclusion** (Chemonics)
- **Module on child functioning questionnaires** (UNICEF)

Do you have any additional tips for accessibility and inclusion for girls with disabilities?

Have you come across any key resources?

Are you interested in being part of a community of practitioners working on digital products with and for girls? Get in touch with the UNICEF Gender and Technology team via
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