



# Reimagining the Indo-Pacific: Using an Inclusive Lens

Policy Brief 5: Digital Transformation Regimes &  
Gender: Perspectives from the Indo-Pacific

The Federal Foreign Office of Germany and Kubernein Initiative have taken the joint initiative to consolidate past and current perspectives and understand the extent of gender mainstreaming in the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on climate, trade and economic security, human and non-traditional security. We consider the centrality of human security in the Indo-Pacific and aim to explore ways forward for shaping more inclusive policies within the region, as well as learn from best practices that may be particularly relevant to Indo-German engagement. The policy brief is part of a series of publications under Kubernein Initiative and the Federal Foreign Office's joint project. Our perspective is rooted in Germany's 'Feminist Foreign Policy' vision, and Kubernein Initiative's work on inclusive foreign policy from an Indian context.

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# Reimagining the Indo-Pacific Using an Inclusive Lens: Digital Transformation Regimes & Gender: Perspectives from the Indo-Pacific

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## Background and Approach

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing rapid digital transformation, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating many digital-first initiatives in the region<sup>1</sup>. For many countries, digitalisation – as a lever for driving growth and development – has become an integral part of national strategies and sectoral policymaking. It lies at the centre of many initiatives for improving public service delivery in sectors such as health and education, fighting climate change, building ‘smart cities’<sup>2</sup>, and revamping payment systems. These aspirations can be seen across strategy documents of different countries – ‘Digital New Deal’ in South Korea, ‘Digital India’, and ‘Smart Bangladesh 2041’ – each representing a grand vision for building an all-encompassing ‘digital state’.

However, with every new ‘digital-by-default’ initiative, the historical exclusion of women, girls, and non-binary folks continues<sup>3</sup>. This means that the persistent digital divide affects how women participate in and benefit from digital marketplaces, digital public service delivery pipelines, and digital platforms<sup>4</sup>. The root causes for the gender digital divide are both systemic and non-systemic, requiring a multi-pronged approach that can address the “entanglements between gender, power, and technology, and the many intersecting forms of inequalities that they produce”<sup>5</sup>. Pervasive gender inequality informs unequal access to and use of digital technology and the subsequent growth and penetration of such technologies deepens gender inequality<sup>6</sup>.

## Vastness of the Indo-Pacific's Socio-Digital Landscape

For a region as diverse and vast as the Indo-Pacific, it is difficult to analyse the various intersecting gender asymmetries using a single narrative or construct. Each country within the region comes with its own unique set of political and economic institutional structures, socio-cultural norms, and demographic make-up, rendering a generalised approach or framework for digital gender equity not only impractical but also undesirable. Moreover, unpacking such issues as well as addressing them will not only require an approach rooted in the discourse of gender justice but also one that is sensitive to local contexts and the intersecting inequities that come with each of these contexts. It is also worth noting that countries within the Indo-Pacific have different starting points when it comes to issues related to gender and digital exclusion. **Countries like Australia and Malaysia are far ahead in terms of internet penetration compared to many other countries in the region<sup>7</sup>. While internet penetration rates are as high as 75-80% in these countries, they fall to anywhere between 50 and 57% for countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, and India, indicating that large swathes of the population do not have regular access to the internet. In a high-income, low-population country like Singapore, the recent discourse is focused on the creation of safer online spaces for women, whereas in countries like India and Indonesia, – where millions of women continue to live with limited access to the digital world – it is still very much focused on the first-order issue of enabling access to such online spaces for women<sup>8</sup>.**

Within individual countries, access and connectivity remain deeply fragmented – divided along the lines of socio-economic grouping, sub-region, gender, and the various intersectionalities seen therein. Progress made by national governments in increasing connectivity is not uniformly distributed. Urban, high-income areas fare far better than their rural counterparts in some of the many Low- and Middle-income Countries (LMICs) like Sri Lanka, India, and Fiji<sup>9</sup>. Even within these well-connected areas, women have inequitable access to the internet compared to their male counterparts.

**As of 2023, South Asia has the largest gender gap in the world in terms of mobile ownership and mobile internet use – with women 15% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 41% less likely to use mobile internet. At the same time, this gap is far less within East Asia & Pacific countries, with women only 2% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 6% less likely to use mobile internet. Interestingly, the gender gap in mobile internet use in South Asia, and across LMICs overall, is largely driven by India<sup>10</sup>.**

It is also worth acknowledging that mobile ownership, in and of itself, is not an adequate lever or measure of the digital inclusion of women. Women's autonomy to use these devices remains limited – with their local and structural contexts shaping how they interact with and utilise such technologies for their benefit<sup>11 12</sup>. For instance, in matrilineal East New Britain in Papua New Guinea, women market sellers use phones more than men, while in the patrilineal Western Highlands Province of the country, the opposite is true<sup>13</sup>.

# Objectives of this Brief

It is against this backdrop that this brief attempts to highlight the diverse conceptions of and approaches to addressing the gender digital divide in the Indo-Pacific. While numerous sub-themes form part of the discourse on gender digital inequities, we focus on two pivotal aspects that are most relevant from the perspective of state-level strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. First, we direct our attention to the various institutional structures that underpin different countries' gender mainstreaming approaches in the region. Second, we provide a commentary on the many imaginaries associated with 'digitalisation for development' in the Indo-Pacific and the implications that these have on the 'gender inclusion' agenda of its national governments.

The brief also attempts to situate this discussion within the larger framework of 'feminist foreign policy' (FFP) – increasingly embraced by many countries, including Germany. FFP represents an emerging, systemic shift in foreign policy perspectives, one that “prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all”<sup>13</sup>. Emphasising the importance of institutionalising gender intentionality in digital policymaking in the Indo-Pacific, we discuss the role FFP can play in orchestrating regional and extra-regional alliances that uphold principles of gender justice in the digital domain.

## Digital Equity Approaches in the Indo-Pacific: Current Limitations

### Institutional Structures<sup>15 16</sup>

To achieve meaningful progress in women's empowerment and gender equality, appropriate institutional mechanisms – laws, policies, and norms – need to exist and flourish. This not only includes a comprehensive integration of gender perspectives across the design and execution of digital governance regimes (policy, legislation, state programmes, budgeting, etc.) but also entails fundamental changes in how such decisions are made and by whom. However, such well-defined shifts towards more gender-sensitive institutional structures are complex and near impossible to achieve.

While many of the Indo-Pacific countries such as Australia, India, and Singapore have expansive national and regional policies for digital inclusion, including long-term partnerships with multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme, integration of gender perspectives within such initiatives continues to be a challenging and complex task. Very few countries have taken an institutionalised approach towards addressing gender inequities in the context of digitalisation.

For instance, India, despite having one of the widest gender digital divides within the Indo-Pacific region<sup>17,18</sup>, is yet to institutionalise its approach towards addressing the gender divide. While certain state-level programmes address gender-based issues in digital inclusion (such as Kerala's Kudumbashree<sup>19</sup>), e-government strategies lack an institutionalised commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment<sup>20</sup>. Notably, the Ministry of Women and Child Development – the country's apex body for women empowerment policies – has, so far, not adequately addressed the question of the gender digital divide. While it has introduced a 'Mission Shakti' scheme for women's empowerment, its approach remains limited to arbitrarily defined 'digital literacy' efforts<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, its Draft National Policy for Women (2016) only makes occasional references to a few gender-based issues, which, albeit important, "do not qualify as a digital empowerment framework"<sup>22,23</sup>.

Another notable example here is that of South Korea, which has certain unique institutionalised provisions for the promotion of gender equity, such as the 2006 'Act on the Promotion of Economic Activities of Career-interrupted Women'. However, 'gender' does not seem to form an integral part of its national strategy for digital transformation. Its 'Digital New Deal' – launched as part of its pan-economy reforms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – includes a variety of provisions for digital transition for sectors like health and education, digital inclusion through learning kiosks, and telecommunications network expansion<sup>24</sup>. However, it does not pay due attention to the specific needs and issues of women, failing to acknowledge the marginalised and gendered experiences of the country's digital economy<sup>25</sup>.

The Philippines, on the other hand, stands out for its progress in institutionalising gender-responsive frameworks, as evident in its adoption of the 'Magna Carta of Women' in 2009 – a women's human rights law that seeks to eliminate discrimination through the recognition, protection, fulfilment, and promotion of the rights of Filipino women<sup>26</sup>. Building upon some of this Act's commitments, the government also introduced the Gender and Development Agenda (GAD), which laid out the country's strategy and plan for gender mainstreaming in government policies<sup>27</sup>. Specifically in the context of digital inclusion, its 'Digital Strategy' for 2011-2016 made a strong commitment to harnessing digital technologies for women's empowerment<sup>28</sup>.

One of the most recent examples can be seen in Pakistan, which introduced a 'Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy' in March 2024. The policy seeks to address challenges on multiple fronts - digital literacy, affordability, online safety, relevance of media/content, as well as prevalent social norms<sup>29</sup>. While there will be a variety of implementation roadblocks for institutionalising policies such as these, their gender mainstreaming approach is a step in the right direction.

## Imaginaries Around Digitalisation & Development

Digital transformation in the Indo-Pacific countries is very closely interlinked with their governments' developmental and growth agenda. It is very often viewed as the key lever for achieving living standards commensurate to those of Western nations. Therefore, many of the developmental strategies in the region – across sectors such as health, education, social protection, and urban planning – are hinged upon aspirations associated with digital technologies. Such imaginaries around digitalisation have led to the emergence of 'digital welfare states', especially in developing economies like Bangladesh, India and Vietnam. Such digital welfare paradigms offer a myriad of opportunities for gender empowerment, but they are often not designed for marginalised communities. Intersecting identities such as race, caste, class, religion and education play a crucial role in how a woman accesses and interacts with the (digital) welfare state. For example, Kilkari, a maternal health messaging program in rural India, was found to have increased men's but not women's immunisation knowledge – since it was mainly men who owned phones with the credit needed to receive messages from Kilkari – a subscription-based service<sup>30</sup>. Even when women reported owning their own phones, husbands and other household members were likely to have answered and listened to a portion of the calls<sup>31</sup>.

In recent years, a range of new technologies have emerged to form the digital welfare apparatus, including, digital identification systems, digital cash transfers, data registries, and virtual platforms for state-citizen interactions<sup>32</sup>. Motivated by considerations related to ‘efficiency’ and ‘plugging of leakages’, these technologies, by design, often prove to be unsuitable or exclusionary for women<sup>33,34</sup>. For example, in Tamil Nadu in India, delivery of food rations moved away from a ‘paper booklet’ system to an Aadhar-linked smart card, to reduce fraud in the system. Instead of manual entries being added to the booklet, recipients received SMS messages. However, in many instances, female recipients did not have their own phones, so their smart cards were linked to a male relative’s phone number. While the system may have led to more efficient service delivery for the regional administration, it limited women’s agency to a large extent<sup>35</sup>.

Increasingly, governments, both globally and within the Indo-Pacific, are looking to include artificial intelligence (AI) within public service delivery. However, extant AI systems are notorious for being prejudiced against women and people of colour<sup>36</sup>. A recent example can be seen in New Zealand, where a Maori woman was misidentified by an AI-based facial recognition system at a supermarket. She was accused of being a shoplifter and evicted<sup>37</sup>.

Such incidents signify the importance of moving beyond issues of digital access and adoption and diverting more attention towards building technologies that, from the start, are gender-responsive – and preferably, gender-transformative<sup>38</sup>. However, given the current frenzy of digital-first projects, gendered considerations seem to have taken a backseat within the various governance agendas of Indo-Pacific nations. Combined with the absence of institutional structures that can rectify such ‘gender-neutral’ design practices, digital policies continue to overlook complex gender asymmetries.

## Towards Feminist Digital Futures in the Indo-Pacific

As discussed above, the Indo-Pacific region represents a variety of digital realities – evident in the diverse ways in which different genders and other social groups access, experience, and participate in the digital realm. Digital policymaking, at national and international levels, needs to be cognizant of such contextual nuances, while at the same time, leveraging the potential offered by cross-border knowledge exchange and technical partnerships when it comes to gender transformative approaches.

Below, we highlight certain essential pathways that can help the Indo-Pacific, as a region, move closer to a feminist digital future.

## Intra-Regional Opportunities

- **Multistakeholder models:**

Individual countries' digital policymaking approach needs to be more inclusive and transparent, creating space for diverse perspectives, opinions, and lived experiences. A top-down, technocratic approach not only risks excluding women and other marginalised communities from the benefits of digital transformation, but may also stifle opportunities for cross-border collaborations between state and non-state actors. The rise of digital sovereignty – “seen as a bulwark against both foreign states and foreign corporations” – for instance, can potentially dilute regional efforts for digital cooperation<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, many countries' attempts to exercise control over the internet is a clear departure from the previous multistakeholder, international model of internet policy<sup>40</sup>. A prerequisite for a feminist shift in Indo-Pacific digital policymaking is the adoption of a multistakeholder approach – one where “issues are debated globally and thought of internationally, instead of being pivoted towards the interest of individual nation-states”<sup>41</sup>.

- **Pan-region strategic blueprints:**

There are a variety of existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks that emphasise either digital cooperation or gender mainstreaming in regional policymaking. The ‘ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021-2025’, for instance, is a comprehensive set of guidelines that help ASEAN countries operationalise gender mainstreaming across different sectors. However, such a practice-oriented blueprint does not currently exist for many other sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific. Such a pan-region blueprint can emulate the ASEAN approach and (i) acknowledge the many complex intersectionalities affecting women in the digital realm, (ii) emphasise the need to understand local contexts, (iii) identify opportunities for collaboration for state and non-state actors in the region, and (iv) push for deeper commitments to gender equity – in the form of better gender-specific monitoring and evaluation of digital inclusion goals, gender-lens investing mechanisms, etc.

## Opportunities for Indo-German Cooperation

In 2020, Germany introduced its Indo-Pacific Guidelines, highlighting its commitment to fostering multifaceted partnerships with the region. In these guidelines, it also acknowledged that the Indo-Pacific is “a fairly blank spot in institutional and normative terms” – underscoring the need for more structural approaches<sup>42</sup>. While ‘rules-based networking’ and ‘digital transformation’ form a part of this vision, there are no explicit provisions for centering gender equity in such digital transformative strategies.

Given Germany's recent FFP guidelines that outline its objectives of making gender equality and women's rights central to its external relations, there is a potential role that Germany can play in promoting digital gender equity in the Indo-Pacific<sup>43</sup>. There is a strong need to include digital policy and cooperation within Germany's FFP framework for the Indo-Pacific:

- **Supporting gender-transformative digital programmes in the Indo-Pacific:**

It is critical for German funding agencies to select and prioritise digital programmes that inculcate a gender lens in their approach and implementation. This also includes supporting digital projects that have been co-designed with local communities in comparison to those that take a top-down, technocratic approach.

- **Embedding gender within India-Germany digital dialogues:**

The bilateral dialogues currently include discussions on emerging technologies, internet governance, data policy and IT security as well as commercial opportunities. The dialogues have already recognised the importance of a multistakeholder approach. Still, specific gender-related issues can receive greater focus within the broader agenda.



- **Strengthening institutional capacities of low-resource states:**

The German government can identify specific hotspots within the region where very few efforts related to gender equity have been made, especially in the context of digital inclusion. For such countries, foundational support – in the form of cross-country working groups and gender-sensitivity training for street bureaucrats – can go a long way in driving shifts towards gender-sensitive digital policymaking.

- **Funding empirical research:**

In addition to programme implementation and policy-related initiatives, the German government can support a variety of multi-regional research engagements. Such projects can focus on gathering and synthesising evidence from decades of Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D) implementation in the Indo-Pacific – facilitating knowledge exchange across countries and contexts. This will help policymakers in the region understand what works and what does not when implementing gender-sensitive policies.

## Conclusion

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Digitalisation offers a vast array of opportunities for driving improvements across many socio-economic indicators in the Indo-Pacific. Most countries within the region are undergoing rapid, fundamental changes in terms of their economic and societal dynamics. Last two decades of ICT4D initiatives have made significant progress in improving the lives of many vulnerable populations. However, progress in terms of dismantling deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, remains elusive - gender power relations found in the offline world continue to inhabit our digital realm, limiting the reach of its benefits<sup>44</sup>.

There is a clear need for a fundamental shift in how the Indo-Pacific region frames and implements its digital policies, across different tiers of governance. Governments defining intra-regional and bi-regional strategies need to embrace a feminist approach in their engagements related to digital policymaking – putting women and marginalised groups at the centre of their “digital revolution” trajectories. Extra-regional powers such as Germany can play a pivotal role in driving this feminist shift in existing models of digital cooperation – by way of gender-centric multistakeholder dialogues and knowledge exchange.

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**About Kubernein Initiative:**

Kubernein Initiative is an independent, female led, geopolitical advisory firm based in Mumbai, India, working to mainstream issues that need greater intellectual capacity and focus. Our vision is to build an organisation that considers critical questions with a perspective that balances traditionally 'western' thought in the field of international relations and diplomacy with new and emerging ideas from the global south.