



Promoting Gender Equality through Digital Reading

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Two thirds of the world's population of illiterate adults are women.

While great strides have been made over the past 50 years, our world suffers from large gender disparities in equitable access to education, income, goods, and services. There are still over half a billion illiterate women in the world, accounting for two thirds of the world's population of illiterate adults. Seventy-seven million young women are unable to read or write a single sentence, let alone decipher a medical prescription or help their children with homework. Likewise, women continue to be at a connectivity disadvantage, with 197 million fewer women than men who own mobile phones.

Realizing Worldreader's mission means a world where every person, irrespective of their gender, can pursue diverse dreams for their futures and have an equal opportunity to make these dreams a reality. We see a world where every child and adult are safe from harm and where they have equitable access and time for education, work, and personal growth. Evidence shows that reading offers opportunities for better health and economic status, and leads to more stable societies. Worldreader strives for a world where reading is an integral part of every stage of life, in order to create a world where everyone can be a reader.

Gender equality, as represented in Sustainable Development Goal 5 and other international agreements [1], is not just a human right, but also a foundation for a peaceful, cohesive, prosperous, and self-reliant world. As such, Worldreader has adopted four gender equality principles to guide our work and support SDG 5:

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Gender equality is an internationally-recognized human right and Worldreader's commitment to it is founded on globally agreed-upon principles, such as gender equity and non-discrimination.
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Gender equality is at the center of Worldreader's efforts and across all levels and parts of our organization.
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Worldreader advances gender equality through gender-targeted interventions and cross-programmatic gender mainstreaming.
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Worldreader will put gender equality at the center of its collaboration efforts with communities, stakeholders, and organizations, as well as advocate for greater focus on gender equality amongst our partners and donors.

These principles have been integrated into our programming around the world through our research agenda and content acquisition. Strong partnerships with organizations that focus on empowering girls and women to live equitable lives with the boys and men in their communities further support these efforts. Gender-sensitive program design, data tracking by gender, and research on the role of content to challenge stereotypes are key strategies for Worldreader. What this looks like in practice:

Principal 1: Promote gender equality as a right



Worldreader is promoting gender equality as a right through the Anasoma project in Kenya and Inspire Us in Ghana. These projects leverage libraries, book clubs, and content to foster dialogue around gender equality and women's empowerment among both men and women.

1. See United Nations 1954; 1964; 1974; 1979; 1993; 1995; Africa Union, 2003; Council of Europe, 2014.

From January 2016 through June 2018, as part of Anasoma, Worldreader conducted research in Kenya around how to increase women's participation in mobile readership, promote more empowering content in the Worldreader mobile library, and mainstream gender sensitive programming throughout Worldreader's projects, its library collection, and its readership. The project resulted in the design of an outreach campaign to reach more women and girls via mobile phones in Kenya, and highlighted three sets of target user groups. The ongoing Inspire Us Project in Ghana led with a writing competition to create a women's empowerment collection and support the creation of ten new pieces of content from West African authors that would seed a conversation about gender equality, which will be added to a collection of twenty available gender empowerment stories. The collection is being promoted in Ghana and Nigeria through a widespread campaign and tested in book clubs in Ghanaian libraries.



Principle 2: Account for gender equality within the organization

Worldreader accounts for gender equality within the organization through diverse leadership and staffing, and regular culture and climate surveys to gauge organizational perceptions of gender-responsiveness among its staff. Worldreader's executive leadership is 60% female, with women comprising two thirds of the larger global leadership team. Worldreader conducts gender-sensitive hiring practices, and strives to sustain an equitable working environment both within the organization and through strategic partnerships with organizations and funding partners who share gender-sensitive values.



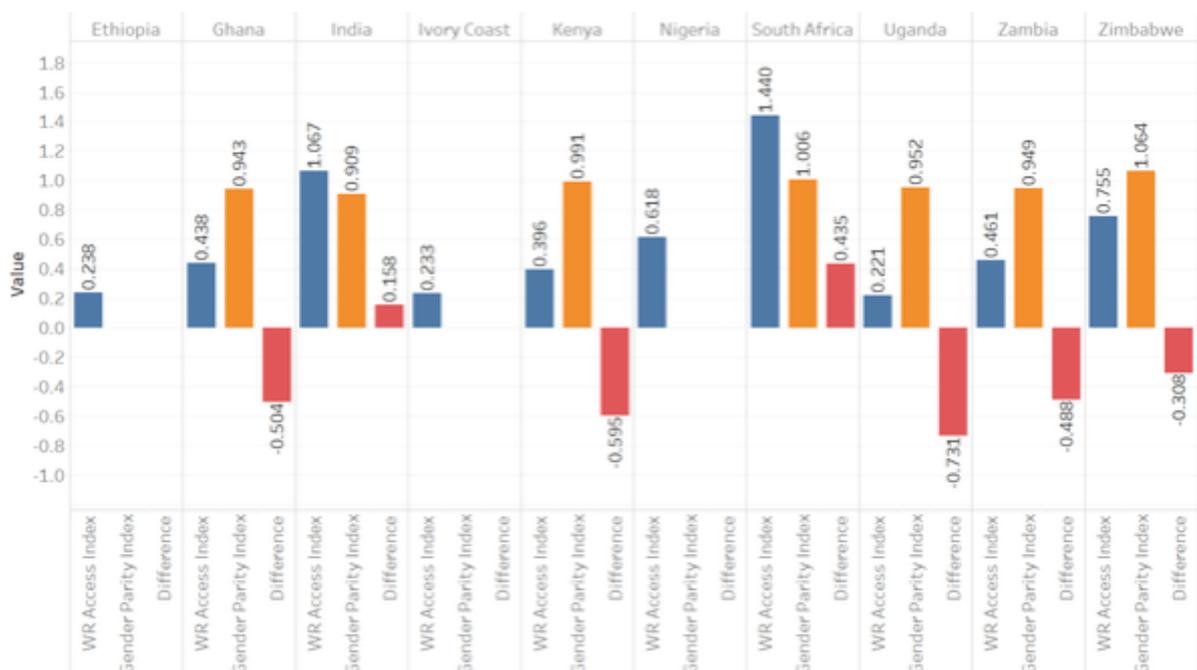
Principle 3: Demonstrate Impact

Our work is focused on demonstrating impact through gender-disaggregated data collection and insights. Inspired by Worldreader's 2014 collaboration with UNESCO on Reading in the Mobile Era, Worldreader partnered with the University of Washington's Technology and Social Change Group (TASCHA). We collaborated to understand the reading behaviors of women and girls reading on our mobile web app and outline the work that needs to be done to reach a more equitable cohort of readers.

The analysis from 2017 and 2018 found that, of the roughly 1% of users that recorded a gender, 96,024 (34%) were female users who had displayed reading behavior and 188,123 (66%) were male. This is a 10% increase from the time of the writing of the UNESCO report in 2013, when only 23% of the analyzed users were female.

TASCHA’s analysis, outlined in Figure 2, compared UNESCO’s Gender Parity Index, the gender index calculated for Worldreader, and the difference between the two indices. Except for India and South Africa, the analysis found that access to the Worldreader app has a larger gender gap than does the literacy rate of the country. Further research will shed light on whether this is a symptom of the application, or simply a symptom of the fact that women in Sub-Saharan Africa are still 15% less likely than men to have access to mobile phones. On the other hand, women in both India and South Africa are demonstrating higher levels of access than men. As TASCHA questioned in their analysis, “Is this a result of other population characteristics in these two countries (such as wealth), increased accessibility of technology and infrastructure, availability of popular content in these countries, Worldreader programs, or something else? Answers to these questions may help point to solutions for overcoming gender inequality in access to mobile reading applications.” What is discouraging men from reading more in these two countries, and what is encouraging more women? Worldreader is working to figure it out.

Figure 2





Principle 4: Value Partnerships and Collaboration

Much of Worldreader's demonstrated impact can be attributed to its programmatic partnerships. Through a partnership with CAMFED, Worldreader provides a digital reading experience to improve learning outcomes of secondary school girls and graduates in Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Running from June 2017 through December 2021, the GEC-T project is implementing e-reader-based digital reading in 50 schools in Tanzania, and mobile reading in Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This project, funded by DFID's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), focuses on girls transitioning from primary to secondary school and tackling barriers to making that change successfully. Worldreader is a sub-contractor on this project, providing digital reading materials, training, and implementation support. CAMA is Camfed's alumnae association, for graduates of their mentorship and leadership development program. CAMA girls in Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe use a customized Worldreader App on their phones to access content that supports their reading skills, professional development, and mentorship work. CAMA girls also serve as learner guides and mentors for the current in-school cohort, reinforcing the importance of leadership and life skills training, and direct community involvement in educational interventions.

In partnership with the Population Council, Worldreader provided digital content that focused on female empowerment to Grade 7 girls in Zambia. The GirlsRead! Project ran from November 2016 - November 2018 with the goal of improving literacy, exam scores, and the chance of progressing to secondary school for girls in 36 of Zambia's government primary schools. The project supported girls in the program to further their social connections, improve their critical thinking skills, develop increased agency and self-efficacy, and in doing so lower the rate of school drop-outs and contribute to reduced risk of HIV. The intervention involved three key activities: E-readers loaded with empowering content and valuable information about HIV and related health risks, safe spaces, and community engagement. Along with community support, girls in the program who used e-readers in the classroom improved their reading abilities significantly (23.3% vs 14.4% control) and developed more equitable gender beliefs (27.4% vs. 10.9%).



Looking to the Future of Gender Equality at Worldreader

Gender equality isn't just about women and girls, but changing gender stereotypes for men and boys as well. Everyone needs to be a part of the conversation. There is a long history and colonial legacy of gender and Western biases in reading content around the globe. This is especially true in Global South countries where much of the content originates from donors from the Global North or government partnerships with foreign investors. Worldreader works to provide digital content from local publishers and authors to readers at every stage of their lives, so that books can reflect reader experiences all over the world and support a locally-owned and sustained book supply chain. Working off of the Inspire Us project in Ghana and a partnership with the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy at the University of Ghana, Worldreader aims to begin studying female and male perceptions around traditional gender norms and empowerment and how content can be leveraged to change attitudes toward them.

The need for this research stems from a limited awareness of how gender norms and women's empowerment are perceived through a local lens for both men and women in the focus communities where Worldreader works, rather than the Western ideals of empowerment that often drive gender-focused education initiatives in these contexts. The proposed research will allow Worldreader to identify trends around gender norms in our focus geographies, and use these findings to inform future programming. If you are interested in funding this research, or Worldreader's mission for gender equality, you can contact Worldreader at devo@worldreader.org.

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