

# Get the Girls Online: Why Wales needs a gendered strategy to tackle digital exclusion

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## Introduction

Around 900,000 people in Wales are digitally excluded (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). This means that they have limited or no access to new technologies such as the internet or mobile phone. A lack of access to digital technologies causes severe disadvantage for many individuals. For example, research shows that '3.6 million low-income households in the UK are missing out on savings of over £1bn a year from shopping and paying bills online' (Fox, 2010). It is exactly those who need it most that are missing out on the benefits of the digital world. In their draft strategy for delivering digital inclusion in Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government identifies the following groups as being particularly at risk:

- Older people
- Those living in deprived areas
- Disabled
- Unemployed/economically inactive
- Those living in social housing

Chwarae Teg argues that any strategy for reducing digital exclusion must be targeted by gender as women make up the majority in most of these groups. Women are more likely than men to face digital exclusion and face greater disadvantage as a result. The latest figures show that 80% of men use the internet compared with 72% of women (ONS, 2009). Research also shows that those least likely to have the internet are from lower socio-economic groups, female and 65+ (Wise Branding, 2010). Further analysis of the identified groups tells us that there is a higher proportion of women than men "at risk" of digital exclusion. To be specific, 60% of the economically inactive population in Wales is female (APS, 2009); 58% of those aged 16-64 who are DDA only disabled are female (APS, 2009); 41% of single women are social renters compared with 24% of single men (ONS, 2008); and only 20% of internet users over 65 are female (d'Arbeloff, 2008). This is despite the fact that the ratio of females to males increases with age.

Chwarae Teg would argue that lone parents are another group particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion. Evidence shows that single parent families are more likely to be living in poverty. For many lone parent households, a lack of finance is the barrier to digital inclusion. In a scoping study we carried out in 2009, we discovered that 90% of lone parent families in Wales are headed by women (Chwarae Teg, 2009). Digital exclusion enhances social exclusion for this group and also has an impact on the educational attainment of children. Experts claim that 'home access to the internet can mean the difference between a child getting an "A" and a "C" at GCSE' (Fox, 2010). The internet can also help parents to engage with the school and there are plans for school reports to become electronic in the near future.

The development of digital technologies over the past decade has allowed processes to become more

efficient and people to become more connected. The Digital Britain report tells us that broadband is 'an essential facility for citizens and consumers in a modern society' (BIS, 2009). Today, 90% of all high street purchases are paid for by card and £50bn of consumer purchases and sales take place wholly online (BIS, 2009). In addition, 58% of UK adults buy goods and services online (Fox, 2010). Individuals can often save money when they make purchases this way or if they pay their bills by direct debit. Many companies only offer these discounts to online customers and so those without access to the internet lose out. In addition, price comparison websites allow consumers to search for the best prices, whilst completing forms online saves time. In a high number of cases, it is the woman that manages the household budget. Statistics "Households off-line miss out on savings of £560 per year from shopping and paying bills online" (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010) show that women make around 80% of all buying decisions. This includes the major household purchases such as a car or electronic equipment. Those who are digitally excluded are unable to benefit from these technological advances and so getting women online can unlock considerable savings for the whole family.

### What are the barriers?

There are many barriers facing those who are digitally excluded. These include fear, lack of confidence, financial constraints and poor skills. If we want to eliminate digital exclusion, we must find ways to help individuals address these barriers so that they do not miss out on opportunities. Much attention is given to those who are excluded due to a lack of service provision in rural areas. However, Winkler (2009) suggests that take-up is actually lower in the south Wales Valleys, in larger urban areas and in disadvantaged communities than it is in rural areas. In fact, rural Wales has the highest level of take up in the UK. Overall in Wales, 99% of households have access to broadband but only 60% take this up (ibid.). Studies show that there are clear differences in internet take-up by socioeconomic group. Those without internet access are typically those who fall within "A greater proportion of households in rural areas ha[ve] the internet than in urban areas" (The Bevan Foundation, 2009) "47% of those living in households earning less than £11.5k do not use the internet compared to only 4% with an income of over £30k" (Fox, 2009) certain social groups i.e. elderly, DE social class2, live alone or have low qualifications (Dept. Communities and Local Government, 2008). The higher the individual's income and qualification level, the more likely they are to have access to the internet at home. For example, Winkler (2009) shows that more than twice as many managerial and professional households have broadband than routine and manual workers (82% compared with 38%).

### The gender perspective

As Chwarae Teg is an organisation dedicated to the economic development of women, we are particularly interested in the impact of digital exclusion on this group. As discussed previously, women are less likely to use the internet than men (72% compared with 80%). Further to this, evidence suggests that 63% of those over 65 and in socio-economic group DE without internet access are female (Dept. Communities and Local Government, 2008). Research from the British Computer Society tells us that women can gain more than men from access to, and use of, technology (BCS, 2010). Chwarae Teg has identified three specific areas in which we believe digitally excluded women experience significant disadvantage:

**Services:** In the very near future, we are likely to see public services move to online provision. Spending cuts are forcing a rapid increase in online service delivery in the public sector. Individuals will soon have to apply for all benefits online. This will affect women who want to apply for child, housing or unemployment

benefit. Businesses are realising that it makes financial sense for them to take their services online as this allows them to reduce staffing and 2 Socio-economic group DE - Unskilled working class administration costs. Almost half of the UK population already use internet to access information on Government or council services. For example, Direct Gov receives 14m visits each month. Providing services online allows significant savings for organisations and accessing them online helps individuals to benefit from these savings (BIS, 2009).

**Economy:** A lack of access to technology can prevent women from engaging with the economy. Recruitment processes are increasingly going online. In the last year, '7 million job adverts [were] placed online' (Fox, 2010). Digital exclusion prevents access to these processes and also excludes women from working remotely. As it is the women's income that, in many cases, decides if a family lives in poverty or not, tackling digital exclusion among women will not only help this group to participate in the economy but also reduce child poverty. In the business world, new technology has become imperative and a lack of access greatly reduces entrepreneurial opportunities. In a digital economy, it is vital that everyone can access broadband services regardless of where they live. Research shows that 'within some rural local authorities in Wales, more than 4 in 10 households are unable to access broadband at speeds greater than 2Mbps' (WLGA, 2009). Good broadband services can reduce isolation and increase an individual's chances of getting a job. For businesses, fast, reliable broadband is vital if they want to maximise workplace innovation or participate in a global economy.

**Communication:** Research shows that women benefit more than men from social networking. Women usually take on the role of 'keeping in touch' with family and friends. New technologies make communication easier and women benefit from increased contact with friends and loved ones. Digital technologies allow free communication across the globe through email, VoIP services (e.g. Skype), instant messaging or social networking. A report on IT and happiness, by the British Computer Society (BCS), shows that 'women benefit more than men from access to and usage of technology' (BCS, 2010). Analysts believe that this is a result of the 'social networking role of women around the world' (ibid.). 75.8% of women use social networking sites compared with 69.7% of men (Corporate Eye, 2010). New technologies make communication easier and women benefit from increased contact with others. Evidence shows that women who live alone such as single women, widows and lone parents are particularly "at risk" of being digitally excluded. In the digital age, exclusion from technology enhances social exclusion and so these women are doubly disadvantaged. The UK Government's Manifesto for a Networked Nation argues that digital technologies 'provide a lifeline from social isolation for the 3.1m people in the UK aged over 65 who go longer than a week without seeing a friend, neighbour or family member' (Fox, 2010).

### **What about those who don't want it?**

Research shows that the main reason people do not have the internet is because they do not want it. A survey by Consumer Focus Wales showed that 41% of those not using the internet just do not want to use it. A further 19% believe they do not need to use it. For 21%, the barrier relates to equipment or cost and 38% lack skills or say it is "too complicated" (Richards, 2009). While there is a need to develop the skills of excluded groups, there is an even greater need to raise awareness and teach people the benefits of going digital. This will help people to understand why it is essential that they are able to use new technologies. Currently in Wales, the Wales Co-operative Centre is delivering a digital inclusion project called Communities 2.0. The project is supported by the European Regional Development Fund and Welsh

Assembly Government and aims to get more people using new technologies. The initiative is offering a wide range of taster courses across Wales to engage people in the digital world. Courses include a beginner's guide to the internet, internet safety, using ebay, setting up an email account and many more. Further initiatives offered in the UK and Europe to encourage more people to get to grips with technology include "Get Online Day" which gets people of all ages to try using the internet and "Silver Surfer Day" which aims to get more older people online. Some organisations are even using computer games such as Nintendo Wii™ to engage specific groups such as older people or young people in care.

### **What can we do to reduce digital exclusion?**

The Welsh Assembly Government provides over 2,600 PCs for public use in 330 libraries across Wales and an increasing number of libraries are providing free Wi-Fi access (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). However, whilst the libraries offer a valuable service to many, they do not offer childcare facilities and have restricted opening hours. There are other venues in Wales that may be able to offer a wider range of facilities over a longer time span. This would make provision more available to working families who do not have access at home. For example, working men's clubs or community centres may be better placed to deliver this provision as they are usually open late into the evening and sometimes house childcare facilities. This said, it is important to realise that 'people from the lower socio-economic groups (DE) and people from the over 65 age group are least likely to use a public access computer' (Richards, 2009). This provides a further challenge as these groups make up a large proportion of those in Wales who are excluded. The UK post office network may also be well placed to "house" free access to online services and expand its service provision to communities. This option is currently being tested in certain parts of Wales. Post Offices in Newbridge-on-Wye and Llanddarog in Carmarthenshire have installed public access computers and wi-fi for public use. However, this network suffers the same disadvantages as the libraries with opening times mostly restricted to the working day and no childcare provision. The provision of training and information is the key to tackling digital exclusion. We have already suggested utilising the skills of those in the community who are digitally enabled to teach and support those who are not. We believe that basic training, through schemes such as the BBC's First Click campaign, is required to provide an "introduction to technology" for those who have not used it before. It is also important to teach individuals about the pitfalls of technology to reduce fear and make sure people know how to keep their information secure. Support services such as telephone call centres could be improved so that users receive a speedy and reliable service. Research shows that 'broadband customers who phone technical support lines are spending millions of pounds annually by being kept on hold' (Richards, 2009). Price comparison site, USwitch, claims that more than 15 million calls are made annually by consumers looking for technical advice. These calls cost an average of £1.75 each time (Richards, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In this rapidly expanding digital age, it is imperative that we get as many people digitally enabled as possible. In order for this to happen, strategies need to be clearly focused in relation to gender. There are two strong reasons for this: Firstly, it is abundantly clear that women make up a disproportionate number of those groups who are currently digitally excluded. Getting women online has a positive effect not only on the individual but also on the family and the community. Secondly, women will be hard hit by public sector spending cuts as they make up the majority of the workforce in the public, voluntary and service sectors. When you consider the extent to which digital technologies provide access to the economy, the case for a

robust gendered strategy is clear. The fact is that the world economy is going digital. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) estimates that 'the total economic benefit of getting everyone in the UK online is in excess of £22bn'. If Wales wants to be part of economic growth, all citizens must be able to participate. Digital inclusion for women is vital if we want to achieve the Assembly Government's vision of a "vibrant" Welsh economy.

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