

## Financial Inclusion and Women's Empowerment: Bridging the Gender Gap in Global Economy

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### ABSTRACT

Financial inclusion is now better understood to be one of the key drivers of greater women's empowerment and economic growth. This chapter explores the interlinkage between women's empowerment and financial inclusion through an examination of key behaviors including bank account ownership, access to credit, saving, and usage of mobile money. It explores how closing the gender gap in these can enable more women to participate in the economy and elevate their social standing. While improvement in account holding is observed for men and women, there is still a remarkable gender gap, especially in more socio-economically unequal countries. South Asian countries show some improvement in gap narrowing, while others like Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia have observed overall expansion in the use of mobile money, opening up new avenues for inclusive financial services. The chapter also examines differing saving behaviors across regions, where in some of them men continue to dominate depending on the level of trust in formal financial institutions. There is also a gap in the use of digital payments, which demands targeted efforts to involve more women in the expanding financial services ecosystem. Enhanced financial inclusion also fosters women's entrepreneurship by improving access to startup capital, enabling business expansion, and supporting participation in formal and digital marketplaces. This, in turn, strengthens women-led enterprises as engines of inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The study concludes with policy-relevant findings to policymakers, financial institutions, and development organizations, stressing the need for gender-sensitive strategies, greater digital financial inclusion, and better data gathering. Women's financial inclusion is cemented as a strategic intervention to enable greater economic empowerment and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** women's empowerment, gender gap, economic empowerment, sustainable development, Inclusive growth, Financial Access and Start-ups, Digital Financial Services

### INTRODUCTION:

The availability and utilization of institutional financial products such as accounts, savings, credit, payment systems, and insurance are better realized to be the main drivers of people's and households' ability to manage their finances, invest in sustainable activities, and reduce their vulnerability to economic shocks (World Bank, 2022). The quest for gender equality and women's empowerment has been enhanced, with evidence showing its contribution to household well-being, community development, and overall economic growth (UN Women, 2020). The measurement of the gender gap in financial inclusion is crucial in an attempt to acknowledge systemic obstacles faced by women and develop effective interventions. The gap is on various dimensions, ranging from bank account ownership to savings, borrowing behavior, use of credit cards, and digital financial services (Antonijević et al., 2022). Holding of accounts, access to credit and savings, use of digital financial services, and overall financial health are key indicators that are of great value in shedding light on women's economic engagement and influencing the strategies that aim to attain inclusive financial environments. Enhanced access to digital

banking and savings account ownership can boost women's control over the allocation of resources and decision-making, bringing about reduced inequality and economic growth (Kaur & Kaur, 2021). This further emphasizes the need for a digital financial inclusion program since technology redefines access to banking, savings, insurance, and credit services.

Despite significant advances in international financial inclusion, a historical gender gap continues to exist regarding access and utilization of financial services (Robino, 2018). The gap is most prominent in developing economies, with the widest gaps reported in South Asia and the Middle East regions (Iskenderian, 2015). Socio-economic constraints, culture, and demand-related factors are the most critical determinants of women's financial exclusion (Roy & Patro, 2022). Women encounter several financial inclusion barriers in various contexts. Socio-cultural attitudes constrain the mobility of women and shape women's financial choices (Kishor & Ahmad, 2024). In addition, economic and institutional barriers in the form of low earnings and incomes and challenges in accessing identification or bank facilities greatly restrict women's participation in formal financial institutions (Laborde, 2020; Bhalla Saluja et al., 2023). Low financial

literacy and low levels of awareness of existing services exacerbate the issue (Kishor & Ahmad, 2024; Rajkonwar Chetiya, 2024). The barriers may encompass discriminatory legislation and culture constraining women's property rights and economic empowerment and poor levels of educational attainment, employment opportunities, and low financial literacy and awareness levels (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

The unavailability of access to financial products is a major constraint to the economic contribution and entrepreneurial development of women in developing nations. Evidence in Kenya proved that increasing basic banking services to female market vendors increased savings, productive investment, and expenditures on personal items (Dupas & Robinson, 2013). Likewise, evidence in Latin America proved the unavailability of access to financial products and services as the major constraint to the entrepreneurial development of women, followed by risk aversion, social norms, and household concerns (Powers & Magnoni, 2010). Despite being half of the world's population, the potential of women is not being optimized in the entire world, thus constraining economic growth and social advancement (López-Claros & Zahidi, 2005; Singh et al., 2013). Nevertheless, gender gaps still prevail in labor markets globally, hindering advancement towards equality (Kochhar et al., 2016). Actions aimed at enhancing gender equity are important to stimulating sustainable development, leading to high economic growth, poverty reduction, and enhanced social outcomes in nations that highly prioritize this agenda (Kaur, 2024). Nevertheless, available literature confirms that improving women's access to finance has various positive impacts. Greater financial services access for women is linked to reduced income inequality, more robust economic development, and improved physical and social health (Cabeza-García et al., 2019). Financial inclusion enables women to save more, reduce risks, and invest in business activities (Demirguc-Kunt et al., 2018). Women bank account holders are likely to reinvest in their enterprises, and female-headed households are likely to spend a higher proportion of resources on education (Sahay & Čihák, 2018).

In this paper, the connection between financial inclusion and women's empowerment is examined in depth through a focus on the indicators of financial behavior. The approach used here in analyzing financial inclusion by location considers financial inclusion by location based on secondary data collected from the Global Findex database. It further examines gender disparities in the domains of account ownership, saving, mobile and formal borrowing, and behavior of using digital money. The paper emphasizes the importance of saving to build financial stability and points towards the possibility of transformation with digital financial services with respect to enhancing efficiency, security, and access.

Financial inclusion is increasingly recognized as a critical enabler of women's economic empowerment and broader economic development. Beyond improving access to banking and financial services, it plays a transformative role in fostering women's entrepreneurship by enhancing access to startup capital, facilitating business expansion, and enabling participation in formal and digital

marketplaces. The study concludes by highlighting the significance of women's empowerment through improved financial inclusion in ensuring sustainable growth in the world economy.

## Literature Review

Financial inclusion has become an inherent force of economic empowerment, especially for women who have hitherto been excluded from the formal financial system. A growing body of research emphasizes that financial access—spanning bank accounts, credit, savings, and insurance—strengthens the economic engagement of women and produces aggregate social development benefits, such as poverty alleviation, education quality, and better health (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022). However, with overall progress in the world, significant gender disparities still persist. Although global patterns show declining gaps in accessing financial services, significant regional disparities continue to persist. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 43.73% of men are provided access to financial accounts, but merely 32.7% of women are provided similar access, with a resultant gap of 13 percentage points (Loaba, 2023). In South Asia, the gap reaches 18 percentage points, thereby perpetuating an apparent great difference in financial inclusion (Kehinde-Peters, 2024). Cultural norms, infrastructural limitations, and regulatory limitations have different impacts in different regions, and context-specific policy responses are needed. Women with incomes below \$2 per day are 28% less likely to have an account than their male counterparts with comparable conditions (Demirguc-Kunt et al., 2013). Women's access to financial services needs to be improved to facilitate gender equality and economic growth (Sarkar et al., 2022).

Financial inclusion offers women an opportunity to self-manage the financial component of their lives, leading to more savings and investment in the needs of their households, such as their education and medical needs (Chakraborty & Abraham, 2023) (Kumari & Veena, 2024). Utilization of financial institutions allows women to make independent decisions on household expenditures and investment, thereby leading to their contributing more to household well-being (Mandal, 2024) (Jedi, 2022). Digital banking provisions provide women with the required needs to engage in entrepreneurship activities and thereby increase their level of financial security and market participation (Bala, 2024).

While there is potential with financial inclusion, women are severely constrained in enjoying the full benefits of digital financial services. The primary issues are user awareness, technical and infrastructural challenges, and data security concerns (Chauhan & Sharma, 2024). Poorer, less educated, and rural women are disproportionately disadvantaged in the utilization of DFS. While there is widespread use of mobile phones, digital finance use is low and uneven, reflecting traditional finance inequality (Caron, 2022). In addition, DFS users are at risk of being exploited by fraud and exposed to misguided financial products (Kofman & Payne, 2020). All these impediments remain to be addressed in order for financial inclusion programs to fully realize their empowerment potential.

Empirical evidence highlights far-reaching effects of financial inclusion on women's empowerment. For instance, in Kenya, the expansion of mobile money services (M-Pesa) is reported to have moved around 194,000 families out of extreme poverty, with the highest increase in savings and financial security in women-headed families (Suri & Jack, 2016). This evidence shows that these initiatives give women more control over money and decision-making within their families and communities, thus ensuring a better socio-economic status for women (Bitan & Lee, 2024) (Ara, 2015).

Socio-cultural barriers, economic disadvantage, and spatiality are associated with persistent difficulties in accessing and being excluded from financial services. Low-income and low-asset-holding individuals are more likely to suffer from financial exclusion (K. Rao & AndualemUfo Baza, 2017). Specific challenges that women farmers in Uganda's agribusiness sector face are lack of collateral, poor financial literacy, and cultural barriers (Basemera Sandra et al., 2024). Financial inclusion is hindered in Pakistan due to female bias, low levels of education, and poor socioeconomic conditions, with income being the main cause of low demand (Nenova et al., 2009). Social institutions contribute to discrimination, hence necessitating country-specific analyses beyond transaction costs (Johnson & Niño-Zarazua, 2011). Other barriers include lack of physical access points, prohibitive fixed costs, legal and regulatory obstacles, and low competition among the financial institutions (K. Rao & AndualemUfo Baza, 2017). Reducing these barriers should take the form of directly targeted interventions toward more financial inclusion of those under-served.

Financial inclusion and access to financial services can be a great incentive for women's strengthening and economic wellbeing, particularly in rural settings (Fletschner & Kenney, 2014). Nevertheless, financial interventions are context-specific, and empowerment does not happen automatically in all circumstances (Kabeer, 2005). While

financial inclusion may push the social and economic development of women (George & Thomachan, 2018), keeping households in control of actual funds is essential for sustainable economic empowerment (Torgovnik & Getty Images, 2021). For instance, designs involving commitment savings accounts or direct cash transfers diminish women's control over their funds and offer protections in order to guard against external demands, while facilitating women's control.

### Research Methodology

This study uses a secondary data analysis approach to investigate the connection between women's empowerment and financial inclusion, paying special attention to detecting and measuring the gender gap across important financial behaviors. The World Bank's Global Findex Database 2022, which offers nationally representative data on how people access and use financial services globally, serves as the data source. This investigation aims to investigate the dynamics of adult population across the regions using the data available for selected countries. In view of the data availability issues, our sample includes the following thirteen countries belonging to the respective regions: Myanmar and Vietnam from East Asia & Pacific; Moldova from Europe & Central Asia; Russian Federation from region not specified as high income; Peru, and Venezuela, RB from Latin America & Caribbean; Egypt, Arab Rep. and Iraq from Middle East & North Africa; India, from South Asia; Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Senegal from Sub-Saharan Africa. This selection represents the East Asia & Pacific, Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, Middle East & North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa for a comparative view of the adult population figures in 2014 and 2021. The datasets were retrieved from the Global Findex database. Financial inclusion indicators disaggregated by gender were included in the empirical analysis of the gender gap in these countries across the specified years, which are presented in Table 1, offering insights into major regional demographic trends.

**Table 1 Variables description**

Variables	Measurement/ Indicators	Source
Gender based account ownership	Account, female (% age 15+) Account, male (% age 15+) Owns a debit or credit card, female (% age 15+) Owns a debit or credit card, male (% age 15+) Has an inactive account, female (% age 15+) Has an inactive account, male (% age 15+) Mobile money account, female (% age 15+) Mobile money account, male (% age 15+)	Global Findex Database
Gender based saving habits	Saved any money, female (% age 15+) Saved any money, male (% age 15+) Saved at a financial institution or using a mobile money account, female (% age 15+)	Global Findex Database

	Saved at a financial institution or using a mobile money account, male (% age 15+) Saved for old age, female (% age 15+) Saved for old age, male (% age 15+)	
Gender based Formal & Mobile Borrowing	Borrowed any money from a formal financial institution or using a mobile money account, female (% age 15+) Borrowed any money from a formal financial institution or using a mobile money account, male (% age 15+)	Global Findex Database
Gender based Digital Money Usage	Made or received a digital payment, female (% age 15+) Made or received a digital payment, male (% age 15+) Used a mobile phone or the internet to send money, female (% age 15+) Used a mobile phone or the internet to send money, male (% age 15+) Made a digital merchant payment, female (% age 15+) Made a digital merchant payment, male (% age 15+)	Global Findex Database

Sources: Author’s compilation

Comparative assessments are made in a quantitative way worldwide, e.g. East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income), Europe & Central Asia (excluding high income), Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income), Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income), South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income) in an attempt to capture the regional variation in gender gaps.

### Analysis and Findings

#### Account ownership and usage

Disparities regarding access to and engagement with formal financial services have been established across regions by the analysis of account ownership and payment instrument adoption practices observing the gender dimension and trends in account ownership, said trends pertaining to the usage of debit or credit cards. Table 2 displays the account status of females and males according to the global findex database.

**Table 2 Account Ownership and usage of debit or credit card**

Country name	Year	Region	Indicators							
			Account, female (% age 15+)	Account, male (% age 15+)	Owns a debit or credit card, female (% age 15+)	Owns a debit or credit card, male (% age 15+)	Has an inactive account, female (% age 15+)	Has an inactive account, male (% age 15+)	Mobile money account, female (% age 15+)	Mobile money account, male (% age 15+)
Myanmar	2014	East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income)	17%	29%	1%	3%	2%	4%	0%	0%
	2021		46%	50%	27%	25%	6%	5%	27%	31%
Vietnam	2014		32%	30%	29%	24%	7%	3%	1%	0%
	2022		53%	60%	46%	53%	4%	5%	15%	18%
Moldova	2014	Europe & Central	19%	16%	19%	17%	2%	1%	DNA	DNA
	2021		63%	66%	47%	48%	2%	3%	DNA	DNA

Russian Federation	2014	Asia (excluding high income)	70%	64%	51%	51%	5%	3%	DNA	DNA
	2021		90%	89%	63%	71%	1%	1%	32%	34%
Peru	2014	Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)	22%	36%	19%	30%	2%	1%	0%	0%
	2021		53%	62%	31%	44%	4%	5%	9%	20%
Venezuela, RB	2014	Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)	53%	61%	46%	54%	4%	5%	3%	3%
	2021		80%	89%	71%	82%	3%	2%	22%	38%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	2014	Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income)	9%	19%	6%	14%	1%	2%	0%	2%
	2021		24%	31%	19%	25%	4%	3%	2%	4%
Iraq	2014	Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income)	7%	15%	4%	6%	4%	5%	DNA	DNA
	2021		15%	22%	8%	12%	3%	4%	3%	7%
India	2014	South Asia	43%	63%	12%	32%	18%	17%	1%	3%
	2021		78%	78%	20%	35%	32%	23%	5%	15%
South Asia	2014		37%	55%	10%	27%	15%	14%	1%	4%
	2021		66%	70%	16%	30%	25%	18%	6%	17%
Ghana	2014	Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	39%	42%	9%	11%	6%	4%	12%	14%
	2021		63%	74%	13%	23%	2%	1%	55%	65%
Zimbabwe	2014	Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	29%	36%	12%	17%	1%	1%	19%	24%
	2021		54%	66%	15%	21%	2%	2%	46%	56%
Senegal	2014	Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	11%	20%	4%	8%	0%	0%	5%	8%
	2021		50%	62%	10%	17%	2%	3%	38%	52%

Note: DNA stands for data figure not available

Exploring the actual status of account ownership from region to region shows an ongoing gender gap, with progress in a few countries between 2014 and more recent times. In East Asia and Pacific, for example, Myanmar had a considerable initial gender gap in terms of account ownership in 2014, with a much higher percentage of men owning accounts. Both sexes, however, saw increases in the number of people who had accounts by 2021, but the gap remained. Vietnam, on the other hand, had a slightly higher initial account ownership among men, and this difference has continued to widen by 2022, despite high increases for both genders. In Europe & Central Asia, Moldova had a relatively small initial gender gap in favor of males in 2014, which slightly widened by 2021, showing significant increases for both. In terms of early 2014 account ownership for men and women, the Russian Federation presented a good picture, but a marginal male

advantage that disappeared by 2021. Latin America & Caribbean is defined by an overall male advantage in relation to ownership of accounts. Peru featured during 2014 by a significant gender gap, which however did not disappear by 2021 as both sexes showed increase in ownership by that time. Venezuela, RB, presents a male-favored account ownership in both years, but the gap sufficiently widened by 2021. The Middle East & North Africa regions show a considerable and consistent gender gap in all respects. Egypt, Arab Rep., had a very high male advantage in 2014 and continued to have it in 2021, where improvements were noted in both sexes. Iraq is revealed to have had a highly gender imbalance in 2014. Sadly, the gap further expanded by 2021. South Asia, notably India, had a very high initial gender gap between account ownership in 2014, but by 2021, there had been a huge leap, where both genders owned accounts and almost

closing the gap entirely. The bulk of data for South Asia would then correspond to the positive trend, indicating a significant reduction in the gender gap regarding account ownership between 2014 and 2021. Finally, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana had a small initial gender gap in account ownership in favor of males in 2014, which widened by 2021 even though there were large increases for both genders. Zimbabwe had a moderate initial gender gap that was skewed toward males and widened extensively by 2021. Senegal had a large initial gender

gap, which narrowed a lot by 2021 but still had a male advantage.

### Saving Habits

The investigation looks at how men and women differ in different locations in terms of how they use formal financial institutions and new mobile money platforms to save. Data on saving behaviors broken down by gender is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Gender wise Saving Habits

Country name	Year	Region	Indicators			
			Saved any money, female (% age 15+)	Saved any money, male (% age 15+)	Saved at a financial institution or using a mobile money account, female (% age 15+)	Saved at a financial institution or using a mobile money account, male (% age 15+)
Myanmar	2014	East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income)	46%	48%	DNA	DNA
	2021		41%	43%	13%	13%
Vietnam	2014		63%	64%	DNA	DNA
	2022		55%	50%	20%	22%
Moldova	2014	Europe & Central Asia (excluding high income)	45%	43%	DNA	DNA
	2021		50%	55%	8%	8%
Russian Federation	2014		41%	40%	DNA	DNA
	2021		34%	42%	16%	22%
Peru	2014	Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)	36%	43%	DNA	DNA
	2021		28%	42%	11%	20%
Venezuela, RB	2014		46%	49%	DNA	DNA
	2021		27%	48%	6%	15%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	2014	Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income)	24%	28%	DNA	DNA
	2021		19%	22%	2%	6%
Iraq	2014		44%	53%	DNA	DNA
	2021		28%	45%	2%	3%
India	2014	South Asia	34%	42%	DNA	DNA
	2021		22%	25%	13%	15%
South Asia	2014		33%	40%	DNA	DNA
	2021		21%	24%	11%	14%
Ghana	2014		53%	58%	DNA	DNA

	2021	Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	63%	74%	37%	55%
Zimbabwe	2014		53%	51%	DNA	DNA
	2021		50%	54%	10%	14%
Senegal	2014		57%	61%	DNA	DNA
	2021		60%	57%	27%	39%

Note: DNA stands for data figure not available

The propensity to save any money in the past year reveals some clearly nuanced gender dynamics. East Asia & Pacific shows Myanmar with a marginal male advantage in saving over both years, 2014 and 2021, but with declining overall saving rates over the period for both genders. Females have higher saving rates in Vietnam for both years, showing an overall trend in saving decline for both genders in 2022. In Europe & Central Asia, the saving landscape remains relatively balanced in Moldova as men and women are about equal in saving rates in both 2014 and 2021, albeit with a slight increase in saving for both. Difference in saving rates does not also exist between genders in the Russian Federation in these years, apart from a very negligible dip that was recorded in 2021. In this region, very few institutions have either savings account facilities or mobile money agents because data are unavailable for previous years. Peru has both periods showing male superiority in saving any amount, while Venezuela, RB, shows increased saving by men for both years. Formal savings or mobile money use has very little penetration in these two nations, while some data exist for 2021, showing very low use. The outlook for the Middle East and North Africa region is mixed. Male saving is slightly favored in Egypt, Arab Rep. In 2021, however, both sexes recorded a reduction in saving rates. Male saving rates for Iraq displayed a higher male preponderance in both years, with an increase of some significance in 2021. Use of financial institutions or mobile money for savings is very limited in this region,

with data available only showing small percentages. In South Asia, savings show gender disparities with males being more likely to save across India and in aggregate South Asia data both for 2014 and 2021. The year 2021, however, has seen some progress concerning savings through financial institutions or mobile money, with slightly bigger uptake among men. In addition, in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to Ghana, there is a substantial male dominance in saving money over the two years, although still a substantial number of men and women in Ghana saving through institutions and mobile money, with females being slightly more favorable in adopting the practice in 2021. Zimbabwe still balances out the scenario but with saving levels of the two gender categories close to one another. Formal or mobile channel saving is reported with an increasing trend in 2021 for both men's and women's saving practices. Saving in Senegal is almost equal among men and women, with the increased use of financial institutions or mobile money for saving in 2021, with men showing more uptake.

#### Formal & Mobile Borrowing

While investigating gender dimensions on borrowing, it further analyzes the proportion of men and women access credit from formal financial institution or using a mobile money account in various regions. As shown in Table 4, the percent of males and females who borrowed money from any formal financial institution or through mobile money account.

**Table 4** Formal & Mobile Borrowing

Country name	Year	Region	Indicators	
			Borrowed any money from a formal financial institution or using a mobile money account, female (% age 15+)	Borrowed any money from a formal financial institution or using a mobile money account, male (% age 15+)
Myanmar	2014	East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income)	DNA	DNA
	2021		9%	11%
Vietnam	2014		DNA	DNA
	2022		10%	11%
Moldova	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		13%	13%

Russian Federation	2014	Europe & Central Asia (excluding high income)	DNA	DNA
	2021		30%	32%
Peru	2014	Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)	DNA	DNA
	2021		21%	23%
Venezuela, RB	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		8%	14%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	2014	Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income)	DNA	DNA
	2021		5%	10%
Iraq	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		2%	6%
India	2014	South Asia	DNA	DNA
	2021		10%	15%
South Asia	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		10%	14%
Ghana	2014	Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	DNA	DNA
	2021		13%	21%
Zimbabwe	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		7%	8%
Senegal	2014		DNA	DNA
	2021		14%	12%

Note: DNA stands for data figure not available

Analysis of available gender-wise comparisons of borrowing from formal financial institutions or through mobile money accounts proves again to be rather limited in both cross-region and temporal comparisons due to the very nature of much of the data as being not available. Yet, where some data is available, some interesting patterns emerge. According to East Asia & Pacific reports, there is a slight male borrowing inclination in Myanmar from formal source or through mobile money, in 2021. Similar trend is shown by Vietnam in 2022 with a higher percentage of males than females to report borrowing from these sources. In Europe & Central Asia, Moldova is somewhere in the middle in 2021, as far as the percentage of male and female borrowing through formal financial institutions or mobile money accounts is concerned. The Russian Federation in 2021 indicates that borrowing through these channels is slightly more inclined towards the male population. The pattern is similar in Latin America & Caribbean. In Peru, 2021, a slightly higher percentage of males borrowed from formal financial institutions, or through mobile money. Also, Venezuela, RB in 2021 indicates that the male borrowing rate supersedes that of females through these formal, or digital, channels. Based on limited data which exists about the region of Middle East & North Africa, males seem to be more dependent on borrowing from formal financial

institutions or mobile money. The same picture is found at Egypt, Arab Rep., in 2021, where more males borrowed than the females. Again, in 2021, males recording borrowing in Iraq were more than females using both services. In South Asia, 2021 data from India singled out the large gender gap in borrowing from both formal financial institutions and mobile money, as most males are more likely to report this activity. The overall trends for South Asia for 2021 reveal similar trends with males borrowing more than females. Finally, in 2021, in sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana showed a higher proportion of males borrowing formal and mobile money accounts than females. Zimbabwe, in 2021, showed an equal borrowing rate for both genders through these channels. The same observation is made in Senegal for the year 2021, which recorded a slightly higher borrowing level among males, as opposed to females.

The scant accessible information suggests a male domination in the use of funds from formal banks or transacting via mobile for borrowing, with females being less active in comparison in various regions. But the overwhelming volume of missing information ("DNA") made it impossible to draw meaningful conclusions or do in-depth comparisons.

#### Usage of Digital money

The gendered trends in the uptake and use of digital payments across various locations are the main focus of the present investigation. Table 5 displays the percentages

of males and females who have used various digital payment methods.

**Table 5**Digital Money Usage

Country name	Year	Region	Indicators						
			Made or received a digital payment, female (% age 15+)	Made or received a digital payment, male (% age 15+)	Used a mobile phone or the internet to send money, female (% age 15+)	Used a mobile phone or the internet to send money, male (% age 15+)	Made a digital merchant payment, female (% age 15+)	Made a digital merchant payment, male (% age 15+)	
Myanmar	2014	East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income)	4%	4%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA	
	2021		37%	43%	23%	29%	18%	15%	
Vietnam	2014		18%	21%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA	
	2022		44%	48%	30%	33%	23%	26%	
Moldova	2014		Europe & Central Asia (excluding high income)	16%	14%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			60%	60%	10%	12%	37%	39%
Russian Federation	2014			59%	55%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			88%	87%	61%	64%	69%	73%
Peru	2014	Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)		17%	28%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			44%	54%	16%	22%	18%	26%
Venezuela, RB	2014			46%	54%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			75%	87%	38%	48%	58%	76%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	2014		Middle East & North Africa (excluding high income)	4%	12%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			16%	24%	2%	4%	3%	4%
Iraq	2014			2%	7%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			11%	17%	3%	12%	4%	8%
India	2014	South Asia		14%	30%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			28%	41%	5%	16%	6%	18%
South Asia	2014			12%	26%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			26%	41%	5%	16%	5%	14%
Ghana	2014		Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding high income)	23%	29%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			59%	72%	43%	59%	9%	21%
Zimbabwe	2014			26%	34%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021			52%	64%	23%	34%	46%	49%

Senegal	2014		9%	16%	DNA	DNA	DNA	DNA
	2021		47%	59%	31%	50%	10%	13%

Note: DNA stands for data figure not available

An analysis of the pattern of adoption and use of digital payments across varying regional landscapes yields a host of complexities intertwined with gender differences. Eastern Asia & Pacific paints a rather positive picture of rising proportions of both genders making or receiving digital payments in Myanmar between 2014 and 2021, with the last year showing a small male advantage. Vietnam also provides a positive environment in terms of increased digital payment adoption and use by both genders between 2014 and 2022, with males showing a somewhat higher level of uptake. For regional Europe & Central Asia, Moldova paints a very rosy picture for both genders from 2014 to 2021 for an increased use of digital payments, where, so far, a strong male dominance is being seen. The Russian Federation has a very high level of digital payment usage for both male and female from both years, with a marginal male lead that widens slightly by 2021. The pattern continues for Latin America and the Caribbean with men remaining dominant on all fronts of digital payment adoption. Peru continues to show a substantive rise for both genders between 2014 and 2021, with males still higher in use. Venezuela, RB, shows a similar scenario, maintaining a considerable male edge in both years. This edge further extends by 2021. In terms of gender disparity in adoption of digital payments across the Middle East and North Africa region, lack of adoption at both genders in both years and slight male advantage is shown by Egypt, Arab Rep. Iraq had also low usage by both genders, but data wrapped for males show a higher number in 2021. Within South Asia, for example with Indian activities, the lead goes with a huge growth under both genders in digital payments between 2014 and 2021, but as expected, men show a better usage rate than women. According to such aggregated data in South Asia, this reflected with a growing gap of gender difference in digital payment use by 2021. Between 2014 and 2021, Ghana made significant progress in improving the lives of both male and female inhabitants in Sub-Saharan Africa through the usage of digital payments. Males, however, retained a significant lead over women. Both had tremendous improvements in use; however, more were found to adopt the mode in 2021 in Zimbabwe. Senegal registered improvements in the usage of digital payments, with a better outcome for males in 2021.

Mobile internet and specifically mobile phone money transfers have very scarce data for earlier years and many countries, while available data for 2021 follows a similar pattern-increased usage by males than their female counterparts in parts of Europe & Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, and South Asia. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the picture is fairly mixed; in Ghana and Senegal, adoption is relatively high for both sexes. Unfortunately, data for digital payments made to merchants in 2014 is just as sparse. Nonetheless, in 2021, a trend of higher male usage in digital merchant payments was visible in several regions of the world: Europe & Central Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, and South Asia. Once more, within

Sub-Saharan Africa, adoption for both sexes appears to be higher in Ghana and Zimbabwe.

### Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this study underline the progress and continuing challenges toward attaining financial inclusion for women across the world. While account ownership has advanced positively in most countries, the theme of gender gap remains a constant refrain. Areas such as South Asia have made marked achievements in closing this gap, forming prominent examples for policy and practice. Nevertheless, other areas continue to exhibit major differences in the access to and the utilization of financial services, especially in the context of formal banking and digital financial platforms. The role of mobile money has particularly emerged as a game-changer in the contexts of East Asia and Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa, where traditional banking infrastructure may not be extensively available. In developing regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, mobile money has been a transformative force providing financially viable avenues for the unbanked population (Wenxiu Nan et al., 2020; Awuah, 2025). This turn holds great potential for enhancing financial access for women. Nevertheless, men and women still display behavioral differences regarding savings, with trends varying considerably between regions. In some regions, women save similarly or more compared to men, while in other regions, men enjoy a lauded favor. These disparities are likely indicators of wider systemic socio-economic, cultural, and sometimes even institutional effects that shape these financial behaviors as well as any possible trust in a financial system. Digital payments also have a gender divide, with men having an upper hand in most instances in enjoyment. Men are more likely to spend money through digital means using credit cards, mobile money, and contactless payments (van der Crujisen & Broekhoff, 2024; Cheah et al., 2021). Although the advancement in the last years has indeed endorsed the usage of digital payments by both genders, accelerated efforts are needed in the next few years if this gap is ever to be closed. More historical data are urgently required to be collected and availed to evaluate the trend and progress of inclusivity since such data are still lacking in consistency and availability, especially in terms of mobile payments and digital merchant payments.

The report proposes measures such as strengthening gender-responsive policies; utilizing mobile financial services; promoting financial literacy and trust among users; improving data collection and disaggregation; engaging private sector participation; cross-regional learning. Furthermore, regulations and policies, including reforms that improve access to ownership of accounts and credits, should favour gender-aware financial inclusion within government and financial service policy. Enhancing financial literacy also, gender-sensitive products will get incorporated into policymaking

recommendations, while transparent legal frameworks will open up to financial institutions (Ojo, 2022; Kowsick & Ramasamy, 2024). Policymakers should also push for expansion in mobile money, especially into unserved areas, to support all these initiatives. Education initiatives should be strengthening financial capabilities for women while making them confident to use financial services formally. Creating awareness on knowledge gaps and dealing with socio-cultural barriers are important. Research shows that women are generally less confident-financial-wise when compared to men and this also translates to poor financial wellness (Tang, 2023). Hence, such initiatives should include the development of personalized financial services, advocacy for financial literacy, and better access through mobile banking (Benyacoub, 2021; Xu et al., 2014). Genders should increase their commitment to investing in more granular and gender-disaggregated data on financial inclusion, addressing issues around digital payment choices and usage of mobile money. Several countries with rewarding achievements can serve as role models for fast-tracking inclusive financial development around the globe. Finally, women versus men in financial inclusion has been seen as an issue not just of equity, but of much broader forms of economic empowerment and sustainable development

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