

# EQUALS

## Gender Inclusivity Index Key Findings

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# Executive summary

The EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index is an assessment tool for companies and organisations to evaluate the state and progress of gender transformation in their internal and external operations and activities. More than a diagnostic tool, the Index was designed to prompt reflection, encourage dialogue and guide organisations in this process. The Index was developed within the framework of the EQUALS Her Digital Skills (HDS) initiative – a collaborative effort between the GSMA, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Ernst & Young (EY) and Women’s WorldWide Web (W4). A pilot of the Index was carried out with MNOs across several regions, the results of which demonstrate both encouraging progress and the challenges of translating gender inclusivity from policy into practice.

From the outset, participating MNOs found the Index accessible, relevant and aligned with their existing diversity and inclusion agendas. The survey questions were considered clear and practical, lowering barriers to engagement and allowing companies to benchmark themselves without being weighed down by technical complexity. The associated focus group provided an opportunity for peer learning where MNOs could share experiences, compare practices and learn from one another’s approaches. This collaborative spirit underscores the fact that **advancing gender inclusivity is not an isolated effort but a shared industry responsibility.**

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**Leadership engagement was a decisive factor for MNOs to incorporate the findings of the Index in their policies and practices.** In several cases, visible support from senior executives, including women in key decision-making roles, gave the Index credibility and momentum internally. Where leadership commitment was strong, the Index’s findings began to shape hiring practices, career development strategies and workplace culture. In other contexts, progress was more gradual, with the Index raising awareness and serving as a catalyst for internal reflection. **The varied experiences of MNOs reflect a sector committed to gender inclusivity but at different stages of maturity.**



A word cloud of key findings from the report. The words are arranged in a cluster, with some in red and others in dark red. The words include: Mentorship, Workplace culture, Leadership Engagement, Equitable hiring, Inclusive Language, STEM Education, Foster Workplace flexibility, Career Development, Leadership pipelines, Skills, and development.

The Index pilot revealed promising best practices that others can build on. MNOs shared examples of embedding inclusive language throughout their organisations and activities, creating women's leadership pipelines, investing in STEM education for girls and women and ensuring workplace flexibility for caregivers. Case studies from Azercell, Bharti Airtel Foundation, Beeline Kazakhstan, Jazz Pakistan and Telesom showcase how gender inclusivity can be translated into action. Their initiatives demonstrate that inclusivity is most powerful when it addresses structural barriers, social norms and lived experiences simultaneously.

At the same time, MNOs were clear about how the Index could be strengthened. They called for more practical tools, templates, checklists and culturally grounded case studies to guide the implementation of recommendations. Stronger alignment with national legislation was suggested to ensure compliance while pushing boundaries. Continuity also emerged as a recurring theme – inclusivity cannot be a one-off assessment and initiative, but rather must be a sustained, continuous commitment and journey with adequate processes to ensure follow-up, accountability and regular dialogue.

The overall message from MNOs in the pilot is clear: the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index has credibility, resonance and the ability to mobilise and catalyse commitment to gender inclusivity. It has already influenced early-stage policy shifts and generated good practices that can be shared across the sector. Yet, the true potential of the Index lies ahead. To drive systemic change, more MNOs need to adopt the Index and will need context-sensitive guidance and support to implement mechanisms that translate the intentions of leadership and policy into concrete, measurable and lasting outcomes.

For MNOs, the case for gender inclusivity is not only about social impact – it also has strategic business benefits. Gender inclusivity enhances brand reputation, broadens the customer base, nurtures talent and strengthens alignment with environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices. **By using the Index as an assessment tool for their long-term strategies, MNOs can move beyond compliance towards transformation and a digital ecosystem where gender inclusivity is not merely an aspiration, but a reality benefiting everyone and generating multiple dividends.**





# 1. Introduction

## Piloting the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index

The EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index serves as an effective tool for advancing gender transformation in companies and organisations. The Index was inspired by the [EQUALS Gender Transformative Digital Skills Education \(GTDSE\) Framework](#) – a joint publication by the EQUALS Her Digital Skills (EQUALS HDS) initiative co-founded by the GSMA, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Ernst & Young (EY) and Women's WorldWide Web (W4). Part of the [EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age \(EQUALS\)](#), EQUALS HDS aims to provide 1 million women and girls with gender-transformative digital skills and mentoring opportunities by 2026.

The *EQUALS Gender Transformative Digital Skills Education Framework* recommends gender-transformative approaches for the design of digital skills education programmes, both inside and outside the classroom, and provides a roadmap for improving women's digital skills while also addressing normative barriers and catalysing social change.

The GSMA and its partners developed the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index to assess gender-transformative approaches of companies and organisations in their internal and external

programmes, policies and initiatives. The Index follows a gender-transformative approach as defined by the framework, while encompassing a much broader scope that goes above and beyond the assessment of digital skills interventions.

**The Index is a tool to help assess the extent to which a specific gender intervention – at the employee, customer/service and/or community (corporate social responsibility) level – is gender transformative.** It also provides recommendations for improving an organisation's overall approach to gender inclusivity in line with existing environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments and considering the added value of gender inclusivity from a business point of view. The Index is comprehensive and innovative thanks to its structured, evidence-based approach to evaluating the state of gender transformation.

The development of the Index was the result of an iterative consultative process involving select MNOs who were invited by the GSMA to participate in a focus group. The Index went through multiple reviews to understand and align with the most relevant aspects of gender transformation. This feedback informed the design of the Index. The process included the following:



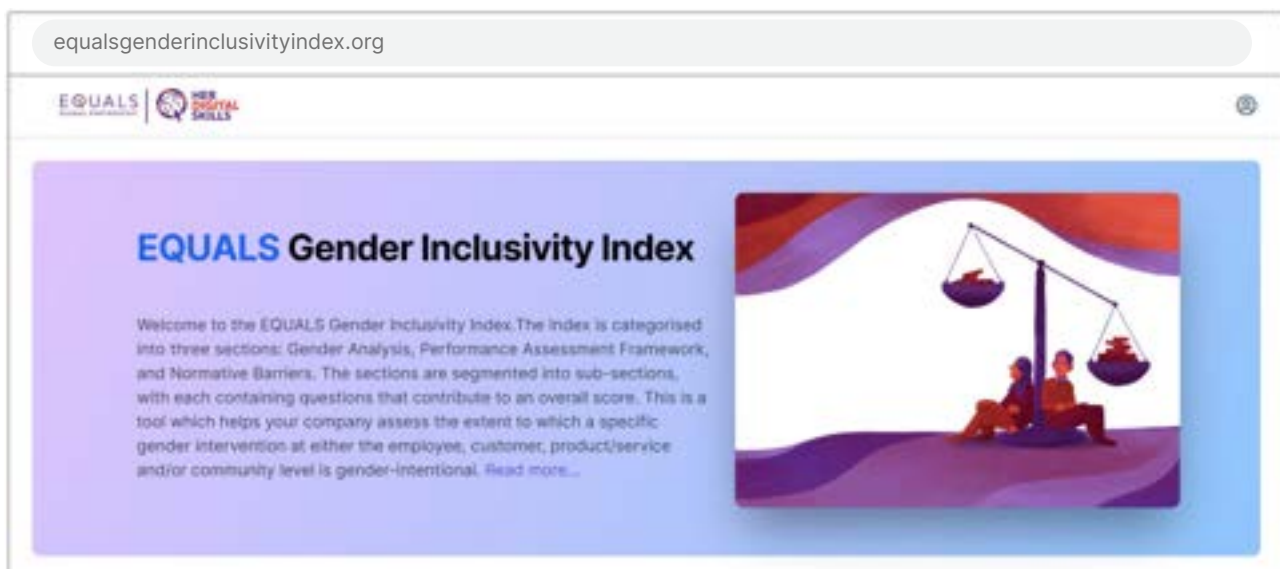
**Initial Survey and Needs Analysis:** The assessment aimed to gather qualitative feedback from MNOs regarding their understanding of Gender Transformation.



**Webinars:** Multiple webinars were hosted to discuss and understand the main challenges and opportunities of gender transformation.



**Validation Exercise:** Once the Index was finalised, MNOs volunteered to participate in a validation exercise. Their feedback was captured and incorporated in the Index development phase.



[Equals gender inclusivity index website](https://equalsgenderinclusivityindex.org)

The results from the initial survey and validation exercise were analysed and then presented over the course of several webinars.

The Index was developed with an emphasis on three parameters: **Gender Analysis**, **Performance Assessment Framework** and **Addressing Normative Barriers**.

The **Gender analysis** section of the Index evaluates the depth and scope of research needed to understand and address the gender-related issues in the specific gender intervention(s). The questions are important for evaluating how the intervention(s) will help to achieve gender parity, while also encouraging gender considerations in all aspects of the work at the employee and/or customer/service and/or community (CSR) level.

The **Performance assessment framework** section of the Index assesses the strategic planning and evaluation mechanisms of a specific gender programme, policy, initiative or intervention, and how effectively impact is monitored. This part of the Index encourages a critical approach to ensure there is a robust framework for assessing performance and impact, and that evaluations are independent and transparent.

The **Addressing normative barriers** section of the Index examines the extent to which a programme, policy, initiative or intervention actively addresses and seeks to dismantle limiting and harmful societal and gender norms, as well as normative barriers that impede gender equality. This section aims to promote women's equal representation and participation,

as well as women's empowerment as leaders, employing strategic communication and promoting culturally-sensitive approaches while challenging biases.

Each section includes a set of eight questions that carry equal weight. Responses to the questions are scored on a scale from 1 to 5. Each section is assigned a weight based on its importance, which is factored into the final average score and rounded to the nearest whole number. The final outcome is an overall Index score and a gender-transformative rating based on the score: Achiever (91–100), Front Runner (75–90), Performer (49–74) or Aspirant (0–49).

Each Index question has five response options commonly used in questionnaires to measure opinions and understanding. These options allow respondents to express the extent of their agreement or the extent to which a statement reflects their experience. They also help to capture a spectrum of responses that are well informed and reflect the collective efforts of the organisation.



As part of the Index pilot, the GSMA provided participating MNOs with a recommendations report based on their score.

## Evaluating the pilot

The GSMA Focus Group included 16 MNOs, 13 of which had participated in the initial survey and needs analysis stage and six in the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index Pilot. The focus group was set up to facilitate dialogue on best practices and lessons learned in gender-specific interventions. The group delved into their experiences with the Index and discussed case studies and/or examples from across the mobile industry. The overall objective was to align the Index more closely with members' specific needs and ESG priorities (not least in line with the ESG Metrics for Mobile Reporting Framework) while making the business case for gender inclusivity and diversity.

The evaluation process began with the **development of two tailored questionnaires**: one for MNOs that participated in the Index and another for those that did not. These tools were designed to guide structured, one-on-one discussions with the MNOs, enabling a nuanced understanding of their existing gender equality initiatives, experiences and challenges. Through these **deep-dive discussions**, the GSMA gathered lessons learned and best practices, and sought to assess the added value of participation in the focus group and Index – that is, the extent to which the Index's recommendations were tailored to the unique contexts and needs of the MNOs while also identifying areas for improvement.

Insights from these discussions have been synthesised in this report, highlighting various gender-intentional approaches already adopted by MNOs (such as strategies to retain female talent in the workplace and bridge the gender pay gap), and capturing feedback on the relevance and usability of the Index, including any positive and impactful changes implemented as a result of the Index.

The report consists of six sections. Section 1 provides background on the GSMA Focus Group and EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index. Section 2 provides an overview of the initial survey and key findings on the needs and challenges of MNOs related to gender inclusivity. Section 3 provides an overview of the results of the Index pilot and Section 4 highlights general recommendations, best practices and areas for improvement, including feedback shared by the MNOs as part of their post-Index interviews. Section 5 features case studies of the focus group participants, highlighting best practices in gender-intentional approaches to programmes and policies. Finally, Section 6 outlines the business case for gender-transformative approaches and provides a recap of the pilot's key findings.



Robotics for Good Youth Challenge Uganda, April 2025, ITU





## 2. Initial survey and needs analysis

This section presents key findings and analysis from the initial survey of MNOs in the GSMA Focus Group, which helped analyse their initial needs and challenges related to gender inclusivity.

It is important to emphasise that the findings of the pilot have limitations given the small size of the sample group, which makes it difficult to extrapolate industry-wide trends. Since no industry benchmarking tool exists, this innovative pilot can serve as an initial, important step towards an industry-wide evaluation.

Thirteen MNOs participated in the initial survey and needs analysis stage of the pilot, which aimed to help them understand their starting point for gender inclusivity, both within their organisation and in their external engagement efforts. This was a critical point of reflection, as it laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of how concepts such as inclusive practices and representation were perceived. By identifying a preliminary set of strengths such as existing diversity initiatives and inclusive leadership behaviours, and challenges such as limited availability of gender-disaggregated data and uneven policy implementation, the GSMA was able to identify the most pressing areas of concern for participating MNOs. These insights proved invaluable in tailoring the approach and shaping the key assessment areas and recommendations in the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index. The process ultimately strengthened the unique value-added proposition of the Index pilot and enabled a collaborative approach.

The initial survey and needs analysis revealed several encouraging trends in gender inclusivity and intersectionality among participating MNOs.



The vast majority – **nearly 80%** of respondents – reported that their company has a formal policy addressing gender and intersectionality, indicating a strong foundational commitment to inclusivity.

Even more notably, all respondents (100%) agreed that their company upholds equitable hiring practices and provides career development opportunities that are accessible to individuals, regardless of gender. This unanimous response reflects a robust organisational culture of fairness and equal opportunity.

Furthermore, 93% of participants confirmed that their company has established clear internal goals and metrics to measure progress on gender equality, suggesting a strategic and data-driven approach.



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Respondents defined a gender-transformative programme as one that goes beyond access to actively challenge norms and power relations – for example, through gender-responsive pedagogy, safe learning spaces, exposure to female role models, mentorship and content that explicitly counters bias. Most respondents agreed with this approach: 81% fully agreed that programmes should be gender transformative, while 19% agreed to some extent.

Lastly, 78% of respondents reported that their company had (an) internal programme(s) dedicated to digital upskilling and reskilling for women. This demonstrates that the companies are proactive in empowering women through technology and skills development.

The analysis also highlighted the strong commitment of MNOs to advancing gender equality beyond internal operations.

**100%**

All respondents agreed that their company actively works to advance gender equality in the communities it serves and supports. This reflects a broader vision of social responsibility and inclusive development.

83% of respondents confirmed that their company runs or supports external programmes aimed at digitally upskilling and reskilling women and girls. These initiatives demonstrate a tangible effort to bridge the digital gender divide and empower women through technology.

There was unanimous agreement (100%) on the need for such programmes, underscoring a shared understanding of their importance in fostering gender equity. In addition, 86% of respondents emphasised that these programmes should be gender transformative, indicating an awareness of the need for initiatives that not only address skills gaps but also challenge and shift underlying gender norms and power structures.

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Based on the responses to the initial survey and needs analysis, the “why” of digital inclusion and equality is clear. The challenge is how to design programmes that lead to real gender transformation and measure the impact of these programmes.

This exercise was undertaken to provide a comprehensive understanding of participating MNOs’ existing policies and initiatives, which informed the design of the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index.

### 3. The Index pilot: results and analysis

Since part of the Index pilot aimed to understand how MNOs are advancing gender equality within their organisations and through their external initiatives, a structured response analysis was conducted. This analysis offers a nuanced view of where participating MNOs stand in terms of gender inclusivity and highlights best practices and critical gaps. **The responses from MNOs reveal a mixed picture of progress, challenges and gaps in the adoption of gender-inclusive practices.**

The pilot findings reveal a strong internal focus on promoting gender inclusivity, particularly through initiatives to advance female talent in the workplace and foster community engagement to support the growth of female digital talent. These efforts suggest a growing recognition of the importance of gender equity in both organisational and societal contexts.

When assessed against the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index, most participants were rated as “Performers” (49–74) indicating a foundational understanding of gender inclusivity principles.

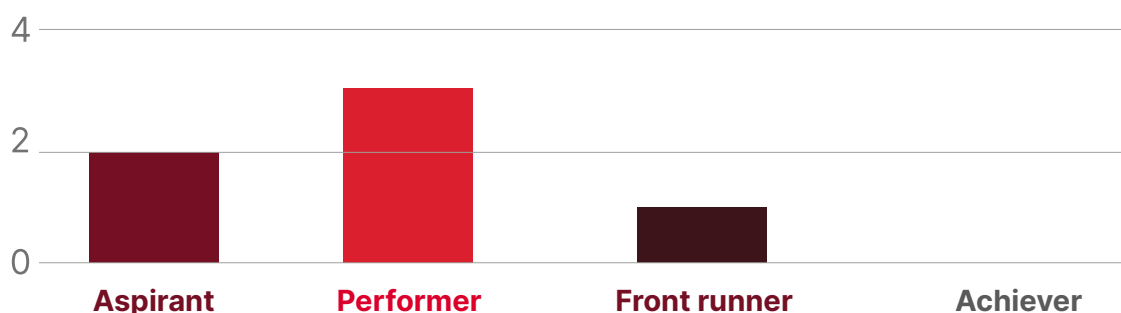
#### Gender analysis

**Only one MNO emerged as “Achiever”** achieving the maximum score of 100. Two MNOs were rated as “Aspirants”, reflecting early-stage efforts that will require substantial strengthening.

Notably, one MNO struggled to identify gender gaps or barriers in their interventions, indicating the need for a more significant intervention. Another MNO reported limited use of gender-disaggregated data in their interventions, which could be attributed to a lack of understanding of how to incorporate the use of gender-disaggregated data in programme and policy design. Even when data was used, one MNO struggled to integrate the findings from gender-focused research in programme design.

**67%** Encouragingly, nearly 67% of MNOs reported having a Theory of Change (ToC), reflecting an intent to create comprehensive roadmaps to address gender-related barriers.

Index Performance Categories



## Performance assessment framework

Equally encouraging, 67% of MNOs have performance assessment frameworks in place, suggesting progress in institutionalising monitoring systems. However, there are persistent gaps in the scope and intent of interventions. While two MNOs reported having gender-inclusive interventions, they did not explicitly target women's empowerment or broader societal impacts.

Only one MNO has undertaken an independent evaluation. However, this same MNO also reported that women's empowerment was not part of its targeted outcomes, and they had not conducted internal evaluations.

## Addressing normative barriers

One MNO scored high in aligning interventions with normative barriers,<sup>1</sup> demonstrating leadership in addressing systemic social and cultural factors. On a positive note, 100% are performing well in promoting equal representation and participation of women, reflecting progress in gender inclusivity in the workforce.

## General insights

The analysis shows that MNOs are laying important groundwork for gender inclusivity, both within their organisations and in their external initiatives. Based on their progress in gender analysis and representation, all six MNOs show evidence of a growing commitment to equal representation and participation of women and girls.

Across the GSMA Focus Group there was recognition that inclusivity must be embedded in institutional practices. Several MNOs are developing structured approaches, with four out of six reporting the use of Theories of Change (ToCs) and performance assessment frameworks. These tools provide roadmaps for addressing gender barriers, setting long-term goals and measuring progress, all of which create an enabling environment for sustained change.

Another positive trend is that a few MNOs are beginning to integrate gender-disaggregated data and gender-focused research in the design of their initiatives. Although progress is uneven, this marks a shift towards evidence-based decision-making. Additionally, some MNOs are making progress in addressing normative barriers, with at least one achieving close alignment between its interventions and social norm challenges. **Collectively, these strengths present opportunities for MNOs to deepen their commitments, standardise good practices across the sector and position themselves as leaders in gender-inclusive business practices.**

Despite these gains, several gaps are undermining the transformative potential of MNOs' initiatives. **The use of evidence remains inconsistent;** only one MNO demonstrated satisfactory use of gender-disaggregated data, while others limited its application or failed to connect gender analysis research findings to programme design. This leads to interventions that risk being superficial or misaligned with the actual needs of women and the overall organisation. Similarly, contradictions in reporting highlight **the need for stronger accountability systems.** Some MNOs claimed satisfactory evaluation practices while simultaneously acknowledging that interventions had never been assessed for effectiveness. Such discrepancies undermine the credibility of important initiatives and reflect **the need for more robust and, ideally, standardised monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks.**



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**Discrepancies undermine the credibility of important initiatives and reflect the need for more robust and, ideally, standardised monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks.**

<sup>1</sup> Without tackling biased gender social norms, gender equality cannot be achieved, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Biased gender social norms – the undervaluing of women's capabilities and rights in society – constrain women's choices and opportunities by regulating behaviour.



Another recurring challenge is the **misalignment between interventions and targeted (empowerment) outcomes**. Two MNOs with gender-inclusive programmes did not include women's empowerment or positive social impact in their stated objectives, reflecting a compliance-driven rather than transformative approach. Evaluation practices are also weak, with only one MNO reporting they had conducted an independent evaluation. Paradoxically, this was the same MNO that had not explicitly included empowerment in its outcomes.

**Normative and cultural factors compound these challenges.** One MNO reported not adopting a communication approach to tackle harmful

gender norms – a significant gap in the digital era where social media and online platforms strongly shape attitudes and behaviours. Another reported that its interventions were not culturally sensitive, which risks alienating diverse stakeholders, reducing inclusivity and affecting workforce satisfaction and productivity. Finally, although equal representation is a strong area, it is not yet systematically linked to empowerment outcomes, meaning that increased women's participation does not necessarily or automatically translate into women's enhanced agency, leadership and positive social impact.



EQUALS Session at MWC Barcelona 2025

## 4. Key findings and recommendations

**The EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index and the GSMA Focus Group proved to be important platforms for MNOs to assess, benchmark and strengthen their commitments to gender inclusivity.** Together, they provide both a diagnostic tool and a peer-learning space, enabling MNOs to reflect on their progress, share good practices and identify areas for improvement. The experiences of participating MNOs shed light on how inclusivity efforts are perceived, how leadership's engagement can make the greatest difference and the challenges and gaps in translating intent into sustainable institutional change.

### Key findings

The experiences of MNOs with the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index and associated focus group activities offer a valuable perspective on how the mobile industry is engaging with gender equality. **Insights reveal a combination of ongoing and increasing commitment, leadership buy-in, emerging good practices and areas that require more targeted support.**

From the outset, most MNOs found the Index to be user-friendly and relevant. The questions were described as simple, coherent and well-aligned with their organisational contexts. For some, the Index felt like a natural extension of their existing inclusivity and diversity efforts, while for others it resonated strongly with their broader mission of empowering societies through digital solutions for health, finance and education, not least by working to increase women's participation in the digital economy.

Others highlighted the clarity and accessibility of the Index, with one MNO noting its close alignment with European diversity frameworks and another appreciating the ease with which the questions could be integrated in existing programmes.

This accessibility meant that the Index did not feel overly technical, it lowered barriers to participation, and it encouraged genuine engagement. The GSMA Focus Group was valued for enabling peer learning and knowledge exchange by creating a space where MNOs could reflect collectively on challenges and solutions.



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Leadership engagement proved to be a decisive factor in how the Index was received internally. In some cases, leadership involvement was visibly significant, with one MNO noting that the direct involvement of a female signing authority lent credibility and visibility to the initiative. In other cases, the focus group prompted dialogue with senior management, with plans to incorporate its recommendations in broader leadership discussions. **These experiences suggest that when leadership awareness and accountability are strong, organisational commitment to gender inclusivity is more likely to deepen and translate into action.**

The extent of change observed varied across MNOs. For some, the Index has already begun to influence internal policies. For example, recommendations from the Index were used to shape hiring practices, signalling a tangible shift in organisational behaviour. At the same time, several MNOs acknowledged that while recommendations were welcomed, implementation was still pending. In these cases, the Index served more as a catalyst for internal reflection rather than an immediate driver of change, indicating a gradual process of institutional adaptation.

## Best practices and areas for improvement

All participating MNOs agreed that both the Index and GSMA Focus Group offered a valuable opportunity for peer learning and benchmarking progress on gender inclusivity. Leadership engagement and accountability stood out as a recurring theme, reflecting a general awareness that senior-level commitment is essential for meaningful progress. MNOs also shared specific operational best practices, such as adopting inclusive language, supporting STEM education and training initiatives, mentoring programmes and scholarship schemes and conducting accessibility audits, all of which demonstrate a move towards concrete, actionable initiatives.

While the Index was largely well received, MNOs also identified areas for improvement. A recurring suggestion was the need for culturally specific case studies that would make the Index recommendations report more relevant across a range of geographies. MNOs expressed a preference for practical tools, such as checklists and templates, that could bridge the gap between recommendations and implementation. There was also an acknowledgement that inclusivity is not only about policies and processes, but also about addressing deeper psychological barriers and leadership mindsets. Stronger alignment with national legislative frameworks was recommended to ensure regulatory compliance while achieving inclusivity ambitions. **Finally, several MNOs emphasised the importance of continuity, noting that the initiative should not be a one-off assessment but rather a sustained, continuous process supported through diverse communication channels to maintain momentum and have a real impact.**

Despite the challenges, all MNOs expressed interest in continuing the work that has begun with the Index and, in some cases, recommended it to other peers in the industry. This suggests that the Index has credibility and resonance, and serves as a useful tool for reflection, benchmarking and collaboration. Nevertheless, the findings underscore that participation in the Index is not sufficient. The greater challenge is ensuring that the Index is not merely a diagnostic exercise, but that MNOs take the findings into account and implement recommendations and relevant actions to drive measurable, long-term institutional change. Furthermore, uptake by more MNOs could enhance the value of the Index, especially if MNOs commit to taking concrete, practical steps towards implementing relevant recommendations.



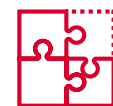
**When leadership awareness and accountability are strong, organisational commitment to gender inclusivity is more likely to deepen and translate into action.**



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**MNOs shared specific operational best practices, such as adopting inclusive language, supporting STEM education and training initiatives, mentoring programmes and scholarship schemes and conducting accessibility audits, all of which demonstrate a move towards concrete, actionable initiatives.**



**The biggest challenge is to ensure that the Index is not simply a diagnostic exercise but rather prompts organisations to implement actions that drive measurable, long-term institutional change.**





## 5. Case studies

In today's rapidly evolving workplaces, mobile and digital service providers across the globe are taking bold steps to integrate gender equity, inclusion and employee well-being in their core strategies. Far from being peripheral initiatives, these programmes reflect a recognition that empowering women, supporting caregivers and addressing systemic barriers are essential for organisational resilience and growth. Some of those best practices from MNOs have been compiled in this section as case studies.

The MNOs featured here were members of the GSMA Focus Group. From Kazakhstan to Pakistan and India to Azerbaijan, these companies are designing innovative policies and initiatives that not only transform individual lives but also reshape workplace cultures. The following case studies highlight how industry leaders are reimagining leadership pipelines, creating safer and more flexible work environments and championing women's participation in technology and society at large.



## Case study 1: Azercell

Azercell, a leading digital communications company in Azerbaijan, has consistently demonstrated its commitment to social responsibility through initiatives that empower women and girls. Two standout initiatives – **Success for Girls** and **Support for Women's Societal Role** – reflect the company's strategic focus on gender inclusion, education and economic participation.

**Success for Girls** was launched to celebrate and support young women who have excelled academically in the field of information technology (IT). Recognising female students who achieved top scores in university entrance exams for IT specialisations, Azercell honoured their achievements with more than just applause. Each student received a thoughtfully curated gift package and a six-month subscription to the "SuperSən 10 GB" mobile data plan, ensuring they remain connected and empowered on their academic journey. More importantly, these students were invited to apply for internships with Azercell's IT team, creating a direct pipeline from academic excellence to professional opportunity. This initiative not only celebrates success, but also actively encourages young women to pursue careers in technology – a field where female representation remains disproportionately low.

In parallel, Azercell launched a broader initiative aimed at strengthening women's roles in society through a **social project competition**. Out of more than 30 submissions, five projects were shortlisted and four were ultimately selected for funding. These winning initiatives spanned diverse areas including education, entrepreneurship, social reintegration and agriculture.

Each project received funding support. The selected programmes focused on developing women's competencies in technology and innovation, improving legal and financial literacy and promoting healthy lifestyles. Notably, one project supported STEM scholarships, another facilitated entrepreneurship training, while others worked with women in prison-based business networks and agricultural skills building.

Together, these initiatives reflect Azercell's multi-dimensional approach to gender empowerment. By investing in both the potential of young girls and the current capabilities of women across various sectors, the company is helping to reshape societal norms and open pathways for female participation in public and economic life. The impact has been tangible: increased visibility of women in traditionally male-dominated fields, enhanced access to resources and training and a growing sense of confidence among participants.

**Azercell's efforts go beyond corporate social responsibility – they represent a vision of a more inclusive and equitable society. By aligning its initiatives with real-world needs and providing both recognition and resources, Azercell is not only supporting individual growth but also contributing to systemic change.**



## Case study 2: Ayelder Power – Beeline Kazakhstan’s journey to empower women leaders

In Kazakhstan, where nearly half the workforce is female, Beeline Kazakhstan recognised a pressing need to bridge the gap between potential and opportunity. **Ayelder Power** was formed as a transformative initiative to unlock and nurture female leadership within the organisation and build on Beeline’s existing efforts, which have led to 40% female representation in middle management.

The programme began with a simple yet powerful idea: to bring together women from across the country and guide them through a journey of growth, mentorship and inspiration. Forty women united under this vision, and 20 embarked on a professional development path that would challenge norms, build confidence and cultivate leadership.



Over several months, the participants engaged in more than 120 hours of one-on-one mentoring, attended intensive training sessions led by Beeline Academy and listened to four deeply inspiring lectures delivered by internationally renowned women leaders. The initiative was not just about professional development – it was also about creating a safe, supportive space where women could reflect, speak openly about their ambitions and challenges and grow together.

Ten senior women leaders from Beeline stepped up as mentors, offering their time, wisdom and unwavering support. Behind the scenes, the Culture and Happiness Team, along with facilitators from Beeline Academy and the public relations team, ensured the programme had structure, visibility and impact both within the company and in the broader community.

The results were striking. Participants reported a profound shift in their professional lives. 73% began applying their new knowledge in daily work, 80% gained a deeper understanding of their strengths and half took on new responsibilities. Some changed career directions, others received promotions and many became more proactive in their roles. The programme earned an average rating of 9.57 out of 10 – a testament to its effectiveness and emotional resonance.

Ayelder Power did not end with the final session. It sparked something bigger – a movement. Beeline Kazakhstan is now building a **Women’s Leadership Community**, a sustainable platform for ongoing development, career conversations and peer support. This community represents a strategic investment in the company’s future, its culture and its commitment to equal opportunity.

**Ayelder Power is more than a leadership programme. It is a declaration that leadership should be accessible to everyone, regardless of gender. It is a step towards dismantling systemic barriers and creating a workplace where women can lead with confidence, authenticity and purpose.**

## Case study 3: Bharti Airtel Foundation

**Bharti Airtel Foundation** is the philanthropic arm of Bharti Enterprises, dedicated to empowering underprivileged children and youth through quality education. With a special focus on the girl child, the Foundation also supports higher education in collaboration with premier institutions.

Rural students often lack access to updated learning tools, limiting their exposure to STEM, language skills and digital literacy. To bridge this gap, Bharti Airtel Foundation introduced **Robotic Labs, Language Labs, Tablabs and Digital Classrooms** in all Satya Bharti Schools. *These interventions address the digital divide and enhance experiential learning. Robotic Labs foster innovation and problem-solving, Language Labs improve communication skills, Tablabs offer mobile learning and Digital Classrooms ensure interactive, multimedia education for all.*



They are unique because they focus on the following principles:

- **Equity:** Bringing quality education to underserved areas regardless of gender
- **Skills development:** Preparing students for the future with STEM, language and personalised learning skills
- **Engagement:** Making learning interactive and fun
- **Teacher support:** Enhancing teaching effectiveness
- **Future readiness:** Aligning with national education goals

The target group includes students from Grades 1 to 10 in Satya Bharti Schools, primarily located in rural and underserved regions of India with limited access to quality educational resources and digital infrastructure. These students were selected due to the **critical need to bridge the educational and digital divide** in rural India. Often first-generation learners with limited exposure to technology and English-language proficiency, this intervention is especially beneficial for them and addresses the following challenges:

- **Limited access:** Rural students often lack exposure to modern learning tools, making it essential to bring technology directly into their classrooms.
- **Skills development:** Early exposure to robotics, digital tools and language labs builds foundational skills in STEM, communication and digital literacy.
- **Equity in education:** This programme ensures that students from marginalised communities receive the same quality of education as their urban peers.
- **Age-appropriate learning:** The interventions are tailored to the cognitive and developmental stages of each grade group, ensuring maximum impact.
- **Long-term impact:** Empowering students at a young age with these tools increases their chances of academic success, higher education and future employability.



## Case study 4: Jazz Pakistan – Flexible work policy

Jazz is Pakistan's largest digital operator and leading ServiceCo, serving more than 73 million connectivity customers and more than 100 million users across its digital services ecosystem. With a team of more than 3,000 employees across Pakistan, Jazz has been at the forefront of digital and financial inclusion through platforms such as JazzCash, Tamasha, Garaj, FikrFree and Simosa. Guided by its purpose of improving lives and livelihoods through technology, Jazz continues to transform into a purpose-driven ServiceCo, enabling 1,440 minutes of digital engagement every day in health, education, entertainment, fintech and lifestyle solutions.

With its transformation into a digital operator, and in response to the changing expectations of a modern workforce, Jazz introduced a transformative initiative known as Jazz Flex. This policy emerged from a core belief: that productivity flourishes when employees are given autonomy. Jazz Flex offers a structured yet flexible approach, enabling eligible employees to work remotely one day a week. This flexibility is not just a perk – it is a strategic move to enhance employee well-being, foster trust and maintain high performance.

The policy is inclusive by design, reflecting Jazz's commitment to inclusivity and support, especially for caregivers. A standout feature is the Momentum programme, designed for mothers returning from maternity leave. Momentum offers three months of full remote work with reduced hours and workload, easing the transition back to professional life. In cases of high-risk pregnancies or medical complications, additional flexibility is granted, ensuring that health and well-being are prioritised.

Since its roll-out, Jazz Flex has seen remarkable uptake. The policy has been well-received across teams, with initial feedback suggesting higher engagement and improved work-life balance, particularly among employees managing caregiving or family responsibilities. As remote and flexible work have become an integral part of the modern tech workplace since the COVID-19 pandemic, Jazz's approach reflects this evolution and aligns with the expectations of today's digital workforce.

Jazz Flex is grounded in gender-inclusive principles. It ensures equal access for all employees regardless of gender and actively works to dismantle systemic barriers. Special provisions for women, such as extended flex days during medical complications and the Momentum phase-back programme, reflect a thoughtful approach to equity. Moreover, by offering remote work options, the policy addresses mobility and safety concerns often faced by women and marginalised groups, making participation in the workplace more accessible.

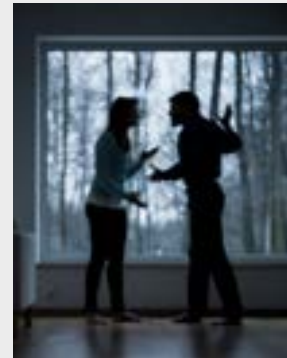
**Ultimately, Jazz Flex is not just a policy, it is a cultural shift. It represents Jazz's vision of a progressive, inclusive and high-performing workplace. By embedding flexibility in the fabric of its operations, Jazz is setting a precedent for how organisations can adapt to the needs of their people while continuing to deliver excellence.**





## Case study 5: Jazz Pakistan's policy supporting victims of domestic violence

Jazz is Pakistan's largest digital operator and leading ServiceCo, serving more than 73 million connectivity customers and more than 100 million users across its digital services ecosystem. With a team of more than 3,000 employees across Pakistan, Jazz has been at the forefront of digital and financial inclusion through platforms such as JazzCash, Tamasha, Garaj, FikrFree and Simosa. Guided by its purpose of improving lives and livelihoods through technology, Jazz continues to transform into a purpose-driven ServiceCo, enabling 1,440 minutes of digital engagement every day in health, education, entertainment, fintech and lifestyle solutions.



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan saw a sharp rise in domestic abuse cases as lockdowns, economic strain and restricted mobility intensified household pressures and limited access to support systems. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2020), more than 90% of women in the country have experienced some form of domestic violence in their lifetime. The issue, often hidden due to social stigma, carries profound implications not only for personal well-being but also for professional performance, psychological safety and workplace inclusion.

In response, VEON (Jazz's parent company) identified the urgent need to extend meaningful support to employees facing or at risk of domestic violence. Under this global framework, Jazz became one of the first companies in Pakistan's telecoms and digital services sector to formally institutionalise protection and assistance for affected employees through a dedicated domestic violence policy. The policy reflects Jazz's broader commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and embeds a people-first approach centred on empathy, confidentiality and dignity to ensure the workplace remains a safe space for all. Support mechanisms are thoughtfully designed to meet the complex needs of victims. Employees can access up to 10 days of paid special leave annually to attend to medical, legal, psychological or family matters related to domestic violence. For those needing adjustments in their work life, Jazz offers flexible working arrangements, including modified hours, changes in job duties or temporary relocation to another office, each evaluated with care and discretion.

Psychological and financial support is a cornerstone of the policy. Victims have access to confidential counselling through Jazz's in-house clinical psychologist, ensuring emotional support without stigma. Financial relief is available through advance salary options, helping to reduce dependency on perpetrators and enabling victims to make empowered decisions. Disclosure is handled with utmost sensitivity. Importantly, conversations are not recorded in personnel files, preserving the privacy and autonomy of the individual.

Since its launch, the policy has quietly made a powerful difference. Depending on their individual needs, employees have accessed special leave, counselling and flexible work options, finding a safe space within their workplace. Line managers have undergone training to handle disclosures with empathy and discretion, strengthening the organisation's capacity to respond to trauma. Employee feedback points to a stronger culture of psychological safety and trust, positioning the policy as an example of progressive workplace practice within the mobile and digital services sector. The policy is deeply gender-inclusive, acknowledging that while domestic violence can affect anyone, women and gender minorities are disproportionately affected. It offers support without discrimination for all employees regardless of gender or relationship type. The special leave and flexibility provisions are especially impactful for women, who often face mobility constraints and caregiving responsibilities. Financial and psychological support further empower victims, many of whom may lack independence due to patriarchal family structures.

By embedding compassion in its operational framework, Jazz is not only protecting individual employees, it is breaking the silence around domestic violence in the workplace. The policy sends a powerful message: that abuse has no place in any sphere of life and that healing begins with support, safety and trust.

**Jazz's initiative stands as a model for how organisations can lead with empathy and contribute meaningfully to societal well-being.**

## Case study 6: Telesom's digital Hagbad – a tradition reimagined for women's empowerment in Somaliland

In the heart of Somaliland, a centuries-old tradition is being transformed by technology. The Hagbad, a rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA), has long been a cornerstone of Somali women's financial lives. It is a system built on trust, community and mutual support in which women contribute money regularly and take turns receiving the pooled funds. For generations, it has helped families manage household expenses, invest in small businesses and navigate life's uncertainties.

At the Somaliland ICT Conference in August 2024, Telesom unveiled Hagbad Iga Dir, a digital version of the Hagbad integrated in its mobile money platform, ZAAD. This innovation allows users to automate contributions and distributions using simple USSD commands, making the process secure, transparent and accessible to anyone with a mobile phone.



The impact was immediate. Within just three months, more than 415 users had joined the platform conducting more than 4,200 transactions. To date, a total of 2,717 women and men have used the service. But the numbers only tell part of the story.

While the service is not targeted exclusively to women, Hagbad has historically been used primarily by women, and data indicates that women continue to be the main users and beneficiaries of the digital version. In fact, several key principles were considered in the design and implementation process: ensuring accessibility for women with varying levels of digital literacy, providing onboarding support through community agents and incorporating feedback from female users during the pilot phase. The goal has been to create a platform that is both user-friendly and responsive to the financial needs of Somali women.

Women like Habi and Hayat have used their digital Hagbad payouts to expand tailoring businesses and pay for their children's university tuition. Others have invested in retail shops, improved their homes or covered healthcare costs. The platform has become more than just a financial tool – it is a catalyst for empowerment.

By digitalising Hagbad, Telesom has not only preserved a cultural practice but enhanced it. The digital format reduces the risks of handling cash, ensures timely payments and provides instant transaction records. This transparency builds trust and accountability, strengthening the social fabric that Hagbad is built upon.

Looking ahead, Telesom envisions even broader horizons. The forthcoming IGA Dir app will allow the Somali diaspora to contribute to local Hagbad groups, extending the reach of this initiative across borders. Plans are also underway to support recurring payments for education, utilities and other essential services, further embedding financial resilience in everyday life.

**In a world where technology often disrupts tradition, digital Hagbad stands out as an example of how innovation can honour heritage while unlocking new possibilities. It is not just about saving money, it is about investing in women, families and the future of Somaliland.**

## 6. Conclusion: the business case for gender transformation

The **EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index** and the **GSMA Focus Group** represent potentially powerful tools to embed gender transformation as a measurable strategic priority across companies and organisations. The Index pilot and focus group have demonstrated how, by integrating gender-inclusive principles in core operations – from workforce development to product design and community engagement – MNOs are already breaking new ground in how gender inclusivity is understood and put into practice. Nevertheless, findings from the pilot show there is still immense potential for companies to embed gender transformation more deeply within their organisations and external initiatives. The EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index can be harnessed strategically to advance gender equality, not only as a social commitment but also as a powerful driver of innovation, growth and sustainability.

Analysis of the Index pilot revealed a nuanced picture of gender inclusivity efforts across three thematic areas. While **Gender analysis** showed moderate proficiency, with encouraging signs of growing awareness, there is a need for more thorough and robust incorporation of gender analyses. The **Performance assessment framework** highlighted structural strengths like strategic planning but exposed critical gaps in independent evaluations and accountability.



“The Performance assessment framework highlighted structural strengths like strategic planning but exposed critical gaps in independent evaluations and accountability.”

Very promisingly, **Addressing normative barriers** had the highest average score, reflecting a solid understanding of normative barriers and a commendable commitment to inclusion and representation, although cultural sensitivity remains an area for improvement.

The Index findings show that MNOs increasingly view gender transformation through a strategic lens. Across organisations, leadership commitment emerged as a decisive enabler of inclusivity. Inclusivity was acknowledged as important for building a strong business strategy and not merely considered an isolated initiative. When senior management actively championed the recommendations of the Index, tangible results followed – from greater gender diversity in leadership pipelines to inclusive policies that prioritise flexibility, safety and equal opportunity. These actions have begun to transform workplace cultures and signal a shift towards accountability and sustained engagement.

### The business case for gender transformation is now incontestable.



Companies that prioritise gender-inclusive business practices enjoy a higher reputation, attract socially conscious consumers and enhance trust and loyalty in increasingly value-driven markets.



Alignment with national gender priorities and ESG frameworks not only meets regulatory expectations but also enhances access to financial incentives and partnerships and boosts investor confidence.

Designing products and services that meet the needs of women and girls, often an underrepresented and underserved consumer segment, unlocks new market opportunities and drives digital inclusion, which in turn can generate new business. Internally, gender-equitable practices can optimise the talent pool and workforce, bring diverse perspectives to problem-solving and fuel innovation, while also improving employee satisfaction and retention. Externally, alignment with national gender priorities and ESG frameworks not only meets regulatory expectations but also enhances access to financial incentives and partnerships and boosts investor confidence.

However, progress in implementing gender-transformative approaches is uneven across organisations and business activities. While foundational systems for gender representation, gender analysis and performance frameworks are in place, significant gaps persist in evidence-based implementation and impact evaluation. The Index pilot revealed that many MNOs lack standardised mechanisms for collecting and using gender-disaggregated data, resulting in interventions that risk being well-intentioned but miss the mark in terms of gender transformation. Similarly, weak evaluation frameworks mean that the effectiveness of gender initiatives often goes unmeasured, limiting opportunities for replication and scaling. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity and norm-shifting communication remain areas where stronger efforts are needed to dismantle deep-rooted gender stereotypes and ensure that inclusivity resonates within local communities and organisational cultures alike.

**Findings from the Index pilot underscore the need for organisations to focus on three key priorities:**



**Building internal capacities for data-driven decision-making and monitoring, ensuring that gender transformation is measurable and transparent.**



**Integrating gender inclusivity in corporate governance, budgeting and leadership accountability structures to institutionalise change beyond CSR and HR departments.**



**Adopting contextualised and culturally grounded approaches that link gender equality to broader business outcomes, ensuring relevance and long-term sustainability.**

The use of structured tools such as the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index should evolve into an ongoing cycle of assessment, reflection and continuous improvement, helping organisations to benchmark progress, identify bottlenecks and course-correct effectively.

The success of the Index also lies in its ability to spark conversations, foster peer learning and generate actionable insights that extend across geographies and corporate structures. It has enabled organisations to translate abstract commitments into tangible actions, whether through flexible work policies, women's leadership programmes or initiatives addressing social barriers to digital participation. As more MNOs adopt and refine these practices, industry progress on gender inclusivity will accelerate, amplifying social and economic returns for all stakeholders.

**In conclusion, gender transformation must evolve from an aspirational goal to an operational reality. The Index pilot shows that several businesses stand at the juncture of systemic change. The EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index offers a powerful tool to accelerate progress, and further uptake of the Index by MNOs could propel the industry forward.** The challenge now is to transform the good intentions of leadership into measurable, lasting impact. By embedding inclusivity in every layer of organisational design, operations and decision-making, companies can redefine what responsible and future-ready business looks like and yield the social and economic dividends of gender inclusivity.

**Ultimately, gender transformation is not just about equality – it is about resilience, innovation and shared value.** It creates workplaces where every employee can thrive, markets that serve all consumers equitably and digital ecosystems that reflect the diversity of the societies they connect.



**By harnessing the momentum of the EQUALS Gender Inclusivity Index, companies have the opportunity to accelerate their gender transformation journey and reap the dividends at every level: organisational, social, environmental and economic.**



# Annex: Additional resources

## Gender analysis

[Global Gender Gap Index](#), World Economic Forum (WEF)

[The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025](#), GSMA

[Reaching Women with Mobile Guide](#), GSMA

[Global Findex Database](#), World Bank

[Gallup](#)

[UN WEPs Gender Gap Analysis Tool](#)

[Towards a Gender Transformative Approach](#), EQUALS Her Digital Skills initiative

## Women's empowerment outcomes

[Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)

[Advancing Digital Competence for Women and Girls: An Equity and Gender Perspective](#), EQUALS Her Digital Skills initiative

[Why Do We Need a Gender Transformative Approach to Digital Skills Education?](#), EQUALS Her Digital Skills initiative

[Women's Empowerment Principles \(WEPs\)](#), UN Women

## Performance assessment framework

[EMERGE database](#), EMERGE

[Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook](#), ITU

[Monitoring Shifts in Social Norms: A Guidance Note for Program Implementers](#), The Social Norms Learning Collaborative

[Data, Tools and Measurement: Guide to Recent Resources](#), ALiGN

[Quantitative Measurement of Gendered Social Norms](#), ALiGN

[Measuring Gender and Social Norms: Recommended Measures for Use in Survey Research](#), Emerge

[Man Enough? Measuring Masculine Norms to Promote Women's Empowerment](#), OECD

[Towards a Gender Transformative Approach](#), EQUALS Her Digital Skills initiative

## Addressing normative barriers

[Human Centred Design process](#)

[Reaching Women with Mobile Guide](#), GSMA

[The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025](#), GSMA

[Towards a Gender Transformative Approach](#), EQUALS Her Digital Skills initiative

[Triggering Mobile Internet Use Among Men and Women in South Asia](#), GSMA

## DEI practices in the mobile industry

[Change the Face Alliance Led by Vodafone](#)

[Various resources by Inclusive Employers](#)

[Inclusive Language Guide](#), OneGSMA

[Diversity Report 2024](#), GSMA

[Confronting the Global Gender Pay Gap Globally](#), GSMA



# E<sup>Q</sup>UALS

## Gender Inclusivity Index

### Key Findings

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