

From FEAR to CONFIDENCE: THE DIGITAL SKILLS JOURNEY of UNDERSERVED WOMEN

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SUMMARY

Though the pandemic presented an opportunity for researchers to study the barriers to broadband adoption and digital equity (e.g., access to robust internet infrastructure and affordable internet options, and digital skills training programs), very little is known about the everyday experiences of underserved African American/Black women and Latinas in the U.S. who have been left out of digital inclusion services due to systemic discrimination. They are the women we serve at EveryoneOn.

As a Marjorie & Charles Benton Opportunity Fund fellow, I conducted a pilot study to learn how underserved women experience the digital divide. Twenty-six interviews and 100 survey responses resulted in robust data from the African American/Black women and Latinas in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee who participated in EveryoneOn's Digital Connections program, a digital skills training. The research, underwritten by the Marjorie & Charles Benton Opportunity Fund and published by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, aims to understand the motivators, challenges, and outcomes encountered by these women in their pursuit of digital literacy and broadband adoption.

MAJOR THEMES

Four key themes emerged from study participants' narratives that transcended racial and ethnic boundaries.

Theme 1: LEARNING, HELPING OTHERS and INDEPENDENCE are MOTIVATORS to BUILD DIGITAL LITERACY and SKILLS

Participants conveyed their aspiration to enhance their digital skills because they recognize the imperative to stay connected, as well as the requisite know-how to remain current with technology to avoid falling behind in society's fast-paced digital landscape. Overall, the women articulated three primary motivations behind developing their digital skills: **1)** a profound eagerness to feel comfortable navigating the internet; **2)** a keen interest in enhancing opportunities not only for themselves but also for their families and communities; and **3)** a desire to reduce reliance on others, such as their children and friends, for help conducting online activities.

Theme 2: FAMILY, FRIEND, and COMMUNITY SUPPORT BROADBAND ADOPTION and LEARNING

The women's participation in digital skills training was notably facilitated by robust family support. In particular, participants' children showed excitement about their parents' involvement in their digital skills development journey. Also, community partners emerged as key facilitators, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts, particularly with anchor institutions, to promote women's access to digital skills training.

Theme 3: JUGGLING FEAR, DOMESTIC/HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES and UNAFFORDABLE INTERNET PRICES ARE REALITIES

When asked what challenges, if any, the women faced in adopting broadband and participating in digital skills trainings, several stood out. First, there is a universal fear about the internet and computers. Second, while not explicitly framed as challenges, most women shared the need to organize domestic responsibilities—such as preparing meals, doing laundry, and caring for parents—to accommodate their attendance at the trainings. Lastly, the majority of women (59 percent) find it somewhat difficult to pay their current internet bill, and 17 percent find it very difficult. This last challenge is significant, given the implications of lacking or having limited connectivity.

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Theme 4: DIGITAL SKILLS FOSTER CONFIDENCE in LIFE

The women attended the digital skills training program to learn diverse tasks, such as using email to communicate with their children’s teachers, exploring new recipes online, and creating flyers for their volunteer activities. Their successful acquisition of these skills translated into a newfound confidence that extended beyond their digital endeavors. Remarkably, following their participation in the training, every interviewee, without exception, expressed heightened empowerment and overall confidence. Several women expressed sentiments such as “I feel like I can do anything now!”

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WHY THIS MATTERS

Documenting and elevating the digital divide experiences of women, particularly low-income African American/Black and Latina women, is essential for several reasons:

There is a gender digital divide in the United States, and the data is missing: The national research narrative lacks representation, notably of women and particularly those from diverse racial and ethnic groups, such as African American/Black women and Latinas—two of the most underrepresented sample groups.

States are developing and implementing their digital equity plans, and women’s experiences must be centered: State and local agencies are developing broadband deployment and digital equity plans. Critical to the success of these efforts is the commitment to centering the voices and narratives of underrepresented groups, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of women, especially those belonging to low-income communities of color.

When women are connected, families and communities thrive: A key motivator for many of the study participants was a desire to help their families, whether by seeking new and improved employment opportunities or by supporting their children with schoolwork or the college application process. A few mentioned wanting to be more informed and equipped to increase their volunteer activities with churches and local community organizations. These desires and goals underscore the transformative impact of digital inclusion on broader social and economic well-being.

CONCLUSION

The insights derived from this pilot study, captured through thoughtful qualitative research, reveal not just the motivations (e.g., desire to learn and help family) and barriers (e.g.,

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unaffordable internet service) women face but also the powerful emotions and self-development they experience in their journey toward digital resilience. Access to and utilization of high-speed internet, computers and digital skills are the obvious tangibles that result from investments in digital inclusion programs. However, women’s intimate experiences of increased self-empowerment, self-love, and self-confidence—the “intangibles”—as revealed in this study are the most powerful outcomes and oftentimes not captured or even considered important data.

This report contributes these unique and valuable insights to inform and enrich the ongoing initiatives aimed at guaranteeing universal access to high-speed broadband and creating opportunities for digital skill development in all communities.