

Making Digital Financial Capability Programs Work for Women



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This series shares how we can improve the design and delivery of digital cash transfers for low-income women. A woman's world changes when payments are designed to suit her needs, digitized, and directed into her own account. Digital financial inclusion means that a woman can be an economic actor and has the opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and hunger. Once women are economically empowered, entire families and societies can flourish.

The World Food Programme (WFP), the Center for Financial Inclusion (CFI), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have partnered to research and document ways to best enable digital financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment through digital cash transfers. WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency and serves women in diverse communities. This experience — paired with CFI's track record in research — means that they can inform practices on government-to-person payments and humanitarian cash transfers.

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Why is Digital Financial Capability Important for Women?

Digital financial capability is having the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and understanding to access financial services delivered through digital technologies. A woman who is digitally and financially capable can evaluate, choose, and use financial services that enhance her life. Because of the complexities that digital financial capability entails, building women's capabilities is not a one-off exercise, but requires an iterative and gradual process.

It is essential to invest in building women's digital financial capability in order to support women navigating increasingly digitalized financial systems. Investing in digital financial capability also contributes to closing the global gender gap in account ownership. Women's meaningful access to and usage of financial services [can be a positive step](#) in improving economic opportunities for women and their families.

Approaches that work for women require going beyond traditional financial education – i.e., information transfer, which [has little long-term impact](#) – to approaches that may require more time, support, and a deeper understanding of the social and [gender normative constraints](#) that prevent women from realizing their economic potential. As we work toward a more effective path for building women's digital financial capability, it is critical to better understand the gendered norms that guide women's lives, and relatedly, the specific challenges that digital technology poses for women.

FOUR-PHASED APPROACH TO DESIGNING FOR WOMEN'S DIGITAL FINANCIAL CAPABILITY

Every digital financial capability program needs to be tailored to the context in which it is delivered,

Investing in digital financial capability contributes to closing the global gender gap in account ownership.



and to the women to whom it is delivered. To ensure the best results, programs should follow four steps. The first is to **Diagnose** and understand the context in which women operate their financial lives. From there, organizations can **Design** and **Deliver** a program that includes some or all of the following elements: information transfer, digital and in-person messaging, high-touch learning, and sharing. Finally, the program should aim to **Document** results, using outcome-focused metrics, as well as report out to peer organizations and the larger financial inclusion industry to improve overall understanding of what works and what does not in digital financial capability building programs.



Diagnose Phase

Before creating a digital financial capability program, providers should speak with the people they aim to reach (their target segments). There are critical pieces of information that must be embedded in a digital financial capability program, and a baseline assessment should be conducted

to learn what women already know, what their financial lives are like, what constraints they face in terms of access to knowledge, their usage of technology, and their financial decision-making. Men and women have different access to, usage of, and skill levels with bank accounts and mobile technology. Furthermore, women themselves are not homogenous and different segments may have different needs. Insights into these differences will create a more impactful program.

Gathering Insights

Gathering existing research is the first step of any diagnostic. Depending on what findings are already

available, new surveys and qualitative tools may be needed to learn more. Doing so helps program designers understand the context in which women are currently managing their financial lives – both the locally relevant limitations as well as opportunities. Quantitative surveys, gender assessments, focus group discussions, conversations with women and their families, and observations through field visits or other interactions in the communities can further augment the insights gathered. Speaking to both mixed gender groups and to women and girls on their own may highlight both limitations and solutions to ensure a successful digital financial capability program.

BOX 1

WFP Jordan Ensures Women's Needs Are Met in the Transition to Mobile Money as a New Delivery Mechanism for Humanitarian Cash Transfers

Women are not a homogeneous group. WFP led a series of focus group discussions with cash-recipients that revealed clear differences between younger and older women and between women who were living in refugee camps and those in host communities. Out of the 193 women and men involved in the research, only two participants did not own a mobile phone. In total, 86 percent of participants (100 percent of men) had smartphones. Primary use of the phones was to communicate with relatives via Facebook and WhatsApp.

Knowledge of mobile money was generally low, although young women living in host communities and young men (regardless of location) had greater awareness, and the men were also savvy to the costs of competing mobile money offerings. Young women living in camps had relatively high agency and autonomy to make decisions about using any funds received, and they had relatively high mobility within the camps; their peers in host communities were far more tech-savvy and educated but had the least autonomy to move around. Quotes from the discussions vividly demonstrate the importance of not assuming that all women are the same:

“ I find that I am able to save more if I do not see the physical cash.”

– Young woman in a host community

“ I find I can save better when I see physical cash. I spend using the card, I will overspend.”

– Older woman in a host community

“ I have used a mobile wallet before. I know how to open an account, send and receive money; it is easy ... I wish I had that option to receive WFP money.”

– Disabled woman in a camp

(Of note, access to mobile money would save her a 20-minute walk and the cost of traveling by bus.)

As part of the Syrian crisis response, WFP Jordan provided USD\$171 million in cash assistance to 500,000 women and men in 2020. WFP is transitioning to mobile money to distribute the entitlements. This option provides choice to women and men as they can select which mobile money wallet they would like to receive their money.

Design Phase

Financial capability is about behavior change that sets people up for long-term economic success and resilience. However, traditional classroom-based financial education programs that are used by many providers to transfer basic, standardized financial information from teachers to adult learners [do not lead to improvements in skills or changes in attitude and behavior](#). Because a standardized curriculum aims to reach many people at once, it is difficult to tailor the curriculum to different skillsets or focus on individual learners' interests and needs.

[Women tend to have lower levels of education and access to mobile technology than men](#) and face normative constraints — such as limited mobility or discriminatory norms — that prevent them from participating in certain economic activities. These barriers negatively impact women's ability to build financial capability. Because these realities are difficult to address with standardized content, traditional financial education approaches tend to be less relevant and effective. (For research citations, please see CFI's 2021 landscape research on [building women's financial capability](#).)

Customization means delivering tailored content for women's needs. For financial and digital capability, this may mean modifying tools or skills based on recipients' income level, type of access to mobile technology, or personal goals and risks. High-touch digital financial capability programs have demonstrated strong results, as the learning applies directly to the women's lives. In-person learning should be fun, interesting, paired with the actual use of a financial product or service, and conveniently located, particularly for low-income women. To achieve that, women must be included in the design process. Collective, iterative design processes will have greater buy-in, relevance, and impact.

TIP

Conversations with women together with their families are an important way to gather insights into any barriers they may face, such as lack of decision-making, that she may not have control over.

Digital Financial Capability May Not Be the Most Immediate Problem to Address

- The Diagnose phase may also elicit more pressing issues beyond digital financial capability gaps. In Uganda, for instance, World Food Programme (WFP) found that women faced prohibitive costs in reaching agent points (two hours walking or a costly motorcycle taxi), often lacked SIM cards (due to lack of ID), and were not likely to own internet-enabled phones.

Additional questions to ask include:

- Do women have an ID to obtain a financial account?
- Do women have their own mobile phone or their own SIM card?
- Is there stable mobile network coverage?
- Are there well-functioning agent locations or other transaction points located near women's homes, or places they frequent and feel safe?



Program Pacing and Flexibility

For many, learning a new skill can be challenging and even uncomfortable. Everyone learns at different speeds and often what works for one person may not work for another. As such, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to building digital financial capability. For example, women may need more time to learn new content and may want to return to the same topic repeatedly in their learning process. Make sure your program can be customized and allows for different learning speeds.

Women often have many demands on their time given their [disproportionate care responsibilities](#). On-demand content — either through pre-recorded Interactive Voice Recordings (IVR) courses or SMS-based tips and lessons delivered via WhatsApp — is an alternative way to enable women to learn on their own time. This, coupled with conversations with family and community members about shared household responsibilities, may have a transformative effect by allowing women to discuss money, involving them in larger financial decisions.

Learn more about how Kenya-based fintech Arifu navigated men’s and women’s different learning needs.

TOP LESSONS

1. Women users took more time with content and frequently returned to learning modules to revisit content.
2. Women often use a shared phone, meaning that their access to online content may be limited.
3. When Arifu made content simple to return to as often as women wanted, they found that more women completed their modules.

Peers and Mentors

Mentors and peer educators are often trusted community members who may play a local leadership role, such as an agent. For women entrepreneurs, [showcasing other women as role models](#), like female business mentors, offers the opportunity to learn from others’ experiences



DID YOU KNOW?

You can increase the impact of learning when the [recipient chooses their trainer](#) and when the trainer is well equipped to provide information.

while accelerating the skill development of participants. [Women tend to lag behind men in terms of financial knowledge and have lower levels of confidence and self-esteem](#). A female role model provides connections and real-life lessons that can result in success.

For example, BOMA Project's rural livelihood program in Kenya found that participants needed help to engage with voice recordings because some of the women found the phone touchpad confusing. [BOMA recorded messages](#) in the voices of known mentors from the community, which created trust as women were introduced to new technology. Use of mobile money among recipients more than doubled as a result.

WFP's research in Ghana, Jordan, and Uganda reiterated the importance of learning via peers and family members, as well as through savings groups, because of the sense of familiarity and positive connotations. In Uganda, WFP has partnered with ["Hey Sister: Show Me the Mobile Money,"](#) a digital financial capability program using IVR, which leverages these relatable and friendly characters in short stories focused on financial decision-making.

Rules of Thumb

Because learning takes time, creating easy tips or rules to remember can lead to desired behavior change. For example, a woman may choose to save one day's wage every pay period. A bank account can be designed to automatically transfer a pre-determined amount out of digital payments to make saving easy. Once set, an automatic savings rule allows customers to "set it and forget it." Another rule of thumb may be to always verify the identity of those requesting funds to avoid phishing scammers. Creating clear rules about not sending funds without first speaking to the other party could alleviate fraud risks.

Deliver Phase

How content is delivered — and by whom — is as important as how it is created. Brilliant content may fall flat if delivered unenthusiastically. Training is also unlikely to be successful if it doesn't include support and follow-up, allowing participants to ask questions or revisit ideas as they experience new situations. Delivery approaches should be convenient and timely to be cognizant of women's time constraints.

In Jordan, [GIZ developed financial literacy](#) and agency banking training materials and used a Training of Trainers approach. The women trainers organized small groups of women in their communities and met them in their homes. These so-called "kitchen meetings" engendered trust in a safe and comfortable space to enhance the learning process.

Bite-Sized Learning

It is difficult for anyone to absorb new information in a short period of time. Rather than long classroom lessons or workshops, programs should prioritize short modules, relevant to upcoming events (for example, a digital payment being sent or a new savings services or loan program).

SMS Nudges and Reminders

SMS nudges and reminders keep learning and information top of mind. Encouragement (such as, "You are halfway to your savings goal!") or reinforcement (such as, "Putting aside small

amounts of money weekly can add up!”) [can impact and change behavior](#). Reminders via IVRs, [message boards](#), and the use of recurring themes throughout the learning process bring pertinent personal information directly to the recipient. For example, a [digital savings app](#) may send weekly reminders of savings goals, loan repayment amounts, or amount saved to date. Timely SMS notifications with humanitarian payments or from financial institutions, for example, [can influence financial behaviors](#).

Learning by Doing

Using moments when financial behavior is top of mind — when receiving cash from an agent, opening a new account, or [receiving remittances](#) — as opportunities to learn and engage with a financial product can have a lasting and positive impact on women’s learning. Receiving government transfers is an ideal teachable moment for women to learn how to sign up for a mobile money account, use an ATM, or visit an agent.

Learners have [higher, long-term knowledge retention](#) when the learning process is tied to a behavior or product. Instead of telling a woman how to conduct a mobile money transaction or open a bank account, learning by doing shows her how to do so by walking her through the steps. Providing guidance while a woman applies a skill for the first time helps cement the knowledge and builds confidence. For example, [female garment workers in Bangladesh](#) learned how to access their digital wages by working with a trainer to register for mobile wallets in their factories, where they also learned about fraud and security (such as keeping their PIN safe).

Inviting other household and family members to also practice the skills can help address gender normative constraints, especially when women face restrictions at home including limits on their decision-making or mobility.

Blended Learning

A strong digital financial capability program will likely utilize many of these learning formats. As an example of blended learning, the [Arab Women’s Enterprise Fund](#) created training and information videos in Egyptian Arabic that women microfinance clients could download at the MFI branches and later watch at their convenience. In addition to the videos,



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follow-up support was provided either in a group or one-on-one. And, because women were able to access and use digital products offered by Tasaheel Microfinance Company, they were able to apply their learnings in real-world situations.

Document Phase

The only way to know if your customer insights, design, and delivery were successful is to measure and document impact. How you will measure impact must be considered from the start and integrated into the program during the Design phase. Gathering sex-disaggregated data from the very beginning is crucial to capturing changed behaviors. It is important to collect data in a way that can be shared across teams and country offices, to contribute to the broader, global understanding of what works and what does not.

Metrics and Evaluation

While collecting data can be time-consuming for both participants and program staff, it can be difficult to know if the program is successful without it. Merely counting the number of women trained does not provide insight into whether the program has enabled those women to evaluate, choose, and use digital financial services that benefit their financial lives.

Below are sample indicators that capture elements of building digital financial capability, which includes increases in financial knowledge and skills, as well as changes in attitudes and behaviors that enable agency in decision-making and choice.

DOMAINS	SAMPLE INDICATORS (ALL GENDER DISAGGREGATED)
Knowledge	% who know about social protection programs targeted at them
	% who know who to go to in their community if they have questions
	% who understands how to identify appropriate financial products for their needs
	% who know about a grievance redressal hotline
	% who are aware of financial products and services (savings, loans, insurance)
	% who understand the rules around a financial account (cost per month, minimum amount to open)
	% who know their customer rights as users of financial products and services
Skills	% who can navigate an ATM
	% who can access the information they need to make financial decisions
	% who can navigate a mobile phone
	% who can call a grievance redressal hotline
	# who are able to operate account without sharing PIN
Attitudes	% who understand the benefits of long-term savings goals
	% who feel they can adapt to the next financial shock
	% who feel confident in managing their finances
	% who report men should not be sole financial provider in a household
	% who feel their financial decisions are supported by their community
Behaviors	% who understand risks, and that they own and control their data
	% who report making joint financial decisions with their spouses and/or other household members
	% who report being less worried about managing finances
	% who use a financial service that meets their needs
	% who put money aside for previously stated savings goal
	% who paid to receive their entitlement (to whom and how much)

For programs that provide payments to women, program leaders may also be able to access reports from partner banks, mobile money providers, or other institutions to understand whether there are changes in the way women engage with the digital service. For example, are women leaving funds in the digital wallet rather than withdrawing all in cash? Are more transactions completed without errors or in a shorter amount of time?

Communication

There are many organizations focused on improving women's digital financial capability. It is important to document and share experiences with others, to write blog posts or other communications about what worked well or did not, and to join webinars and engage in discussions as we collectively work to refine programs to increase digital financial capability for women throughout the world.



Additional Resources

For additional information, the following provides a list of publications and global organizations' experiences focused on digital financial capability.

RESEARCH

1. CFI's research on women's financial inclusion explores what is needed to create transformational change to the binding norms that impede women's and girls' participation in the financial system. Lower financial capability is one barrier for women G2P recipients, rural and agricultural workers, and women seeking opportunity in the platform environment. CFI builds on a long history of research in this space; the following are recent pieces related to financial capability:

- a. Social norms are addressed in [blog posts](#), and in [Normative Constraints to Women's Financial inclusion: What We Know and What We Need to Know](#).
- b. Digital financial capability is addressed in [blog posts](#), [webinars](#), and in [Building Women's Financial Capability: A Path Toward Transformation](#).

2. Highet, C. May 2021. [“Enabling Women's Financial Inclusion Through Digital Financial Literacy: A synthesis of FinEquity members' insights.”](#) FinEquity.

“This brief is a FinEquity community effort and it is meant to help the financial inclusion community understand digital financial literacy and better address this component of the digital financial services gender gap. The synthesis is organized by enablers (literacy, numeracy, access, awareness, and design) and their associated challenges, and highlights the cross-cutting constraint (social norms). This framework helps unpack the different dimensions of digital financial literacy and demonstrate why they should not be tackled in isolation as they are very much connected. The brief also includes four case studies of organizations addressing digital financial literacy in their work in countries such as Cambodia (My Money Tracker, Good Return's Café Initiative), Bangladesh (HERproject, BSR; Government Social Safety Net Cash Transfer, Aflatoun Int'l) and Ghana (Hey Sister, SIA).” Each section provides additional useful resources focused on specific issues related to the enabler.

3. **Koning, A., J. Ledgerwood, and N. Singh. 2021. [“Addressing Gender Norms to Increase Financial Inclusion: Designing for Impact.”](#) CGAP.**

This Guide advocates for funders to use the market system development approach and proactively take gender norms into account when working to increase women’s financial inclusion. Using this approach can help funders and their partners understand where in the market system barriers exist as a result of gender norms, who the various system actors are that can either influence or restrict change, and what can be done to encourage them to challenge these norms.

4. **Barca, V. Dec. 2021. [“Useful COVID-19 and Social Protection Materials.”](#) Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 Expert Advice Service (SPACE). DAI Global UK Ltd.**

The document is a curated collection of essays and information focused on COVID-19 socio-economic impacts, social protection responses, and thematic insights. Readers focused on gender and Inclusion will find a curated list of sites and reading. There is a section focused on gender and inclusion, with additional work on disability.

5. **Women’s World Banking has shared case studies and experiences from their pilot testing and rolling out of financial capability and digital financial capability programs over many years. Two recent publications are included below:**

- a. **Dimova, M., J. Berfond, S. Kelly, and W. Mapes. 2021. [“Empowering Women on a Journey Towards Digital Financial Capability.”](#)** Provides a brief background of digital financial capability, principles for design (Who, What, When, Where and How) and two case studies: one from a fintech partner in Indonesia for credit for microenterprises and the other from a ready-made garment program in Bangladesh to increase usage of digital products.
- b. **Eng, A., E. Panggabean, K. Thao, and R. Mana. Nov. 2021. [“From Ownership to Usage: Empowering G2P beneficiaries through a better account engagement solution.”](#)** Provides a brief overview of creative approaches to ensure women’s enrollment in an Indonesian G2P program. After diagnosing the key barriers, they employed creative solutions to build awareness and trust. A gamified approach led women to complete a series of transactions in order to get a reward, and to build digital financial capability.

6. **Lundberg, M., and F. Mulaj. 2014. [“Enhancing Financial Capability and Behavior in Low- and Middle-Income Countries.”](#) World Bank.**

This 2014 work serves as a useful source of definition and measurement of financial capability, methods, and tools to understand the impact of financial capability program. Shares case studies of different methods for financial capability building — using financial diaries, TV soap operas, comic books, radio, and other means for reaching a broader audience than more conventional means.

TOOLKITS

1. [Mobile Internet Skills Training Toolkit](#), GSMA.

The toolkit uses a “train the trainer” approach to teach basic skills to enable people to use mobile internet. The toolkit is available for free and available in a variety of languages including Hindi, Swahili, Spanish, Bengali, and Ndebele.

2. [Digital Financial Literacy Toolkit](#), July 2021, Alliance for Financial Inclusion.

Focused on guidance to policy makers who are seeking to develop and implement digital financial literacy programs. “The Toolkit aims to provide practical guidance to AFI members and other financial inclusion policymakers on formulating and implementing DFL strategies and interventions, and then, monitoring and evaluating its progress over time, in a systematic and efficient way.”

3. [“Integrating Financial Capability into Government Cash Transfer Programs.”](#) 2018, The World Bank.

This toolkit brings together a diverse set of experiences and learning from across the World Bank’s programs that have supported governments to develop, implement, and integrate financial capability into government cash transfer programs.

4. [Women’s Financial Inclusion Toolkit](#), 2021, GIZ.

This toolkit brings together a diverse set of experiences and learning from across the World Bank’s programs that have supported governments to develop, implement, and integrate financial capability into government cash transfer programs.

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