



Case Study 5.2

Gender digital inequality from the Life Course perspective

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The current state of gender digital inequality is the outcome of accumulated oppressions that women, who used to be girls, have faced throughout the course of their lives. For the last decade, research and discourse on gender digital inequality has advanced slowly but steadily; still, it lacks theoretical perspectives which could provide insight into the mechanisms of gender digital inequality as well as critical intervention points to reduce it. The concept of “life course” is one of the primary theoretical frameworks in the field of gerontology and human development — and it can be applied to enhance understanding gender digital inequality.

Individuals belong to a cohort based on their birth years, in historical context and time (Elder, 1998). The life course perspective emphasises the structural influences of cohort, history, culture, and location in relation to individuals’ life experiences and pathways while attempting to bridge sociological and psychological constructs (Hooymann & Kiyak, 2011; Settersten, 2006). For example, a girl born in a developing country during the twenty-first century has quite different gender norms, attitudes toward technology, and choices for her education, major, career etc., compared to a woman who was born in the same country during the early half of the twentieth century, or a girl born in the same year but in a developed country. Gender socialisation means “learning gender” (Moen, 2016); members of different cohorts and societies learn gender differently, which influences how they view their lives and make decisions about their future.

Early life experiences and decisions, often constructed by society, affect future life experiences; advantages and disadvantages tend to be accumulated over the life course and maximised in old age (Dannefer, 2003). The gender digital divide needs to be understood from this life course perspective. Women’s decisions on education and career arise from early life experiences and social constructs by cohort. For example, strong gender identity and stereotypes have been reported to be associated with negative attitudes toward mathematics among female college students (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002), becoming a constraint on moving into careers in science and engineering (Moen, 2016). Also, after starting a family, woman often becomes the primary caregiver for children and other family members, responsibilities that may conflict with full-time employment in demanding positions, limiting career options and increasing women’s vulnerability to poverty.

The life course perspective would suggest that enacting seemingly simple solutions, such as increasing access to the internet and digital devices among girls and women, cannot work effectively without fundamental changes in prevalent gender norms and culture. Current and future cohorts of both girls and boys should not learn gender, while both women and men need to unlearn gender, especially around the potential to succeed in math, science, and other technical subjects. Older women also suffer social exclusion related to digital literacy, in that accumulated disadvantages, including those related to gender norms, tend to be maximised in old age. Furthermore, older women often serve as caregivers of young children for dual-income couples. Considering that they are the agents transmitting values to the next generation and also the most vulnerable to digital exclusion, interventions targeted to grandparents and grandchildren might be effective in reducing gender digital inequality in both the short and long term.

