## Executive summary

# Real girls, real lives, connected

**A global study of girls' access and usage of mobile, told through 3000 voices**



**Vodafone Foundation** | **Girl Effect**

# Executive summary

Mobile phones have the potential to transform lives. They can be used to create connections, encourage learning, accelerate financial independence, and provide life-saving and life-changing information. However, the extent of girls' mobile access and use is not well understood.

This study, a partnership between Girl Effect and Vodafone Foundation, is the first to explore how girls in more than twenty countries around the world are accessing and using mobile phones. It is designed to give a voice to the girls accessing - or trying to access - phones. It uses the experiences, challenges, and realities of over 3,000 girls and boys to drive recommendations for how mobile phones can be used to improve lives and livelihoods.

# Around the world, mobile and internet access is rapidly increasing.

# However, access is not growing equally. Data from the GSMA shows that across low and middle income countries...

The gap is even greater when it comes to mobile internet, with women 26% less likely to use it than men[1].

If this gap is to be effectively addressed, it needs to be understood. In particular, little is known about mobile access and usage for one crucial group: adolescent girls. Girls are generally subsumed within the broader category of 'women', but the challenges and realities they face are often different and intertwined with additional challenges. Because of this gap, many girls are missing out on the opportunities that mobile can afford.

## 184m

### fewer women own a mobile than men

1. GSMA Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap report 2018

# Methodology

In order to understand this hard-to-reach demographic, we designed a unique research methodology in collaboration with MIT D-Lab. This mixed-method approach involved:

- **An initial literature review** to identify existing understanding about girls' access and usage of mobile.

- **In-person and detailed interviews** with girls and boys led by Girl Effect's Tech-Enabled Girl Ambassadors (TEGAs), where girls aged 18-24 are employed and trained using bespoke smartphones to become Market Research Society qualified researchers.

- **Key informant interviews** with international development, technology and gender experts. These explore how girls access and use mobile phones, including barriers, challenges, and drivers of success.

- **Online engagement** through a survey deployed across 21 countries, and comment analysis of online discussions driven by a series of vignettes.

This methodology is centred around the unfiltered views and voices of girls themselves, and provides an opportunity to engage more than 3,000 respondents in 25 countries.

These voices have been captured by other girls just like them and by meeting girls on platforms that they are already using to access information and entertainment.

This study included girls from 25 countries however, the girls that we spoke to do all have some level of mobile access, so we do not claim to represent the views of all girls, or to provide a complete global picture. Rather, this qualitative study aims to inform future programmes and bring attention to the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of girls as a particular subset of women, including their voices in the global conversation about mobile access and use.

**This research methodology provides an opportunity to engage more than 3,000 young people in 25 countries**

## Key finding 1:
## Girls have more access than you think

Lahore

Kano

Lima

Kigali

## From Kano to Kigali and from Lima to Lahore, girls are getting their hands on mobile phones.

The desirability and utility of phones mean that, even when it is challenging to get access, girls are often doing so in a range of creative ways.

In fact, girls who might state that they 'don't have a phone', are often still accessing mobile through other means.

Girls' access to mobile phones is complex. Access is often compromised, transient, and strongly influenced by local gender norms. This prompts a rethink of the binary distinction between 'no access to mobile' and 'access to mobile' that often drives programme development. Instead, girls, and boys, tell us that access for them is not permanent.
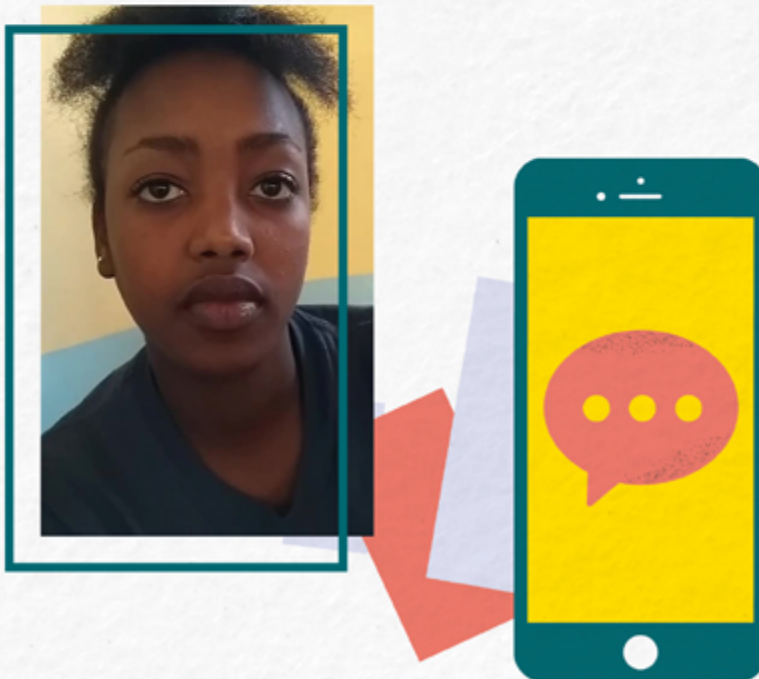
# Key finding 1:
# Girls have more access than you think (cont.)

## Does not own a phone

**56%** **33%**
(502) (104)

## Owns a basic phone

**23%** **29%**
(209) (90)

## Owns a smart phone

**21%** **38%**
(185) (120)

● Girls   ● Boys

Do you own a phone? TEGA data excluding US n=1,210

Phones break, they get sold when money is tight; they are confiscated or used by other family members, or get stolen.

Ownership levels vary across countries, with only 37% of girls in our sample in Nigeria owning a mobile phone, compared to 99% of girls in the USA. There is a strong age and gender dimension too.

For example in many countries surveyed, boys are 1.5 times more likely to own any type of phone and 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone than girls[2]. Additionally, young people aged 18 and 19 are more likely to own a phone than 15 to 17 year olds. Girls are nearly as likely to own a smartphone as a basic phone, while boys are 1.3 times more likely to own a smartphone than a basic phone.

Amongst the TEGA sample, phone borrowing is particularly high in Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Nigeria and Rwanda. Additionally, some borrow alongside owning their own phone. Girls are much more likely than boys to borrow phones, and parents are the main source of a phone for girls.

In some locations such as northern Nigeria, where girls are often forbidden access or allowed only very limited (and monitored) access, girls get their hands on phones 'secretly', often through borrowership of friends' or siblings' phones or even ownership through gifting from boys or older men.

**[If a girl doesn't own a phone]… it can mean many things. Maybe the phone stopped working or it got stolen or she doesn't yet have the money to buy one, or her parents stopped her because she is still young, things like that…**

(Girl, 17, Rwanda)

## Boys are 1.5x more likely to own a mobile phone than girls

**1.5x**

2. Stat based on analysis of data from locations in 6 countries—Malawi (Mzimba, Lilongwe and Zomba); Rwanda; Tanzania (Temeke, Dar es Salaam); Nigeria (Kano); India (Bihar and Rajasthan); and Bangladesh (Dhaka and Jessore). USA excluded based on high girl and boy ownership, which skewed Africa and Asia respondent data. With USA included, boys are 1.4 times more likely to own any type of phone and 1.6 times more likely to own a smartphone.

# Key finding 2:
# Girls' phone use varies broadly



**When girls access a phone, they're using the device for a range of different activities**

However, the extent of this usage varies widely across countries, and boys are more likely to use a phone for a wider range of activities than girls. Boys are also more likely to use the phone for activities requiring an internet connection[3].

**We can use a mobile phone to access the Internet, to study. It helps with many other things we do in our daily life, we can get a bank loan, transfer money in banking, pay an electricity bill, book a railway ticket, air ticket and whatever work we have, we do it through mobile phone.**

(Boy, 16, Bangladesh)

3. This holds true across sample from locations in Malawi (Mzimba, Lilongwe and Zomba); Rwanda; Nigeria (Kano); India (Bihar and Rajasthan); Bangladesh (Dhaka and Jessore) but not Tanzania (Temeke) or the US (Adams County, Colorado).

# Key finding 2:
## Girls' phone use varies broadly (cont.)

However, this disparity is narrower in South Africa, Colombia, the Philippines, Bangladesh and India, where many girls demonstrate sophisticated phone use that is having a positive impact on their lives. For example, supporting girls to manage finances and providing a gateway to new opportunities.

**After buying a mobile phone I have been able to do a lot of good stuff. I do online exams, fill in application forms, send emails. If I have to travel I find out about the train times. In case I get stuck anywhere, then I contact my family members to tell them that I am stuck at that place. I do a lot of good things on a mobile phone, like studying and using the dictionary.**

(Girl, 18, India)

This difference in usage appears closely linked to differences in access between girls and boys. Lack of access has serious implications for girls' tech literacy, as they are unable to familiarise themselves with devices, and/or develop confidence to explore more sophisticated ways to use their phones.

Similarly, transient access prevents incremental learning as girls need to start from scratch every time they gain access to a new type of phone.

This can be compounded as girls often don't have more sophisticated phone users in their social network they can learn and get support from, particularly if they are using the phone in secret. These networks, including family, friends and peers, are often key conduits through which girls learn about the benefits of using a phone, and relevant use cases. If these individuals aren't aware of the potential of mobile or are unwilling to teach them, then girls are often unable to imagine how the phone could be directly relevant and valuable for them.

**I don't know how to make of smartphone, I don't know how to check the content inside the phone so as to know the one which is preferable to me.**

(Girl, 17, Nigeria)

**Key finding 3:
Many challenges
stand in her path**

# People say that the girl who touches the phone is a bad girl.

**Rosni, 16, Bangladesh**

# Key finding 3:
## Many challenges stand in her path (cont.)

Girls face a range of physical and social barriers that prevent them from accessing, using and benefitting from mobile phones. Physical barriers relate particularly to affordability, with 42% of the TEGA sample mentioning handset cost as one of the reasons they don't own phones, and 13% of girls mentioning data costs. Girls also highlight infrastructural issues - although to a lesser extent - saying it is difficult to register a SIM, reporting bad signal and having issues with charging a phone.
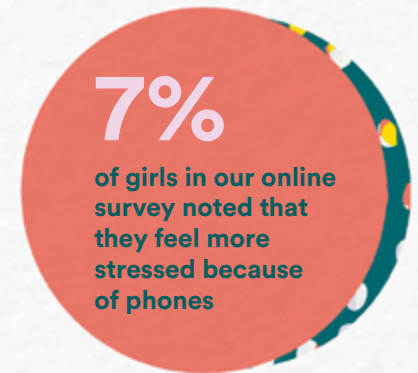
For boys, cost is the biggest barrier to mobile phone access, while girls identify social barriers as the main constraints on their phone use. Parental permissions present a major challenge for girls, with almost half of girls in the TEGA sample (47%) identifying parents' safety concerns as the reason why they don't own a mobile.

Wider social norms also limit girls' access and use of mobile phones. In India and Bangladesh, for instance, girls who are seen using mobile phones can face harsh negative judgement from community members.

Some girls also appear to be internalising these negative perceptions. For example, girls fear that phones can lead to them 'going astray', and girls in Malawi and Rwanda were most likely to say that phones lead to contact with boys and ultimately result in unwanted pregnancy.

Girls also highlighted their own personal experiences of negative consequences resulting from phone use. For example, 7% of girls responding to the online survey noted that they feel more stressed because of phones, whilst 4% reported that they had been harassed or bullied due to accessing phones. Additionally, 3% of girls felt that phones made them more controlled by others.

**7%**
of girls in our online survey noted that they feel more stressed because of phones

**For boys, cost is the biggest barrier to mobile phone access, while for girls, social barriers are the main constraints**

**47%**
of girls in our sample identified parents' safety concerns as the reason why they don't own a mobile

# Key finding 3:
## Many challenges stand in her path (cont.)

How much mobile access a girl has is broadly informed by the agency she already has in her everyday life. Girls across countries see the phone as a gateway to the world outside the physical space of their home. However, the extent to which they view this as a benefit or a drawback is largely dependent on the social context in which they live. Girls living in environments where they have more freedom and agency to make their own decisions, tend to have greater levels of access to a phone and describe its 'gateway' quality as a highly appealing benefit, allowing them to make new connections with people outside their community:

**We can connect globally, get to know more about what we are studying, and we can learn many things through the Internet... We can know about things that are unknown to us.**
(Girl, 19, Bangladesh)

In contrast, girls with less freedom and agency to make their own decisions, tend to have less mobile access and see the 'gateway' benefits primarily as enabling communication with their family and more immediate peers. Instead they tend to frame this 'gateway' quality more negatively, emphasising how this gives the phone an element of risk.

**Smart phones have bad videos and other obscene material is there that pollutes their mind. And they talk with boys over Whatsapp, which they hide from their family.**
(Girl, 19, India)

Perceptions of safety and risk are key to how girls engage with the phone and the access their parents allow them. Girls emphasise much more than boys how valuable a phone can be for minimising danger in their lives. This is particularly because it gives girls a channel to communicate quickly with family members. In countries where girls tend to have less access and less varied usage, this is often given as the primary justification for having a phone, whereas girls in countries with more access list this as just one of many benefits to the phone. Girls feel that parents also acknowledge this benefit, and it is frequently the primary reason that family members give or lend girls a phone.

**Key finding 3:**
**Many challenges**
**stand in her path (cont.)**

# If parents give their son a mobile phone, the community doesn't say anything, but when parents give a girl a phone, the community asks questions.

**Nisha, 17, India**

# Key finding 3:
## Many challenges stand in her path (cont.)



**Smart phones have bad videos and other obscene material is there that pollutes their mind. And they talk with boys over Whatsapp, which they hide from their family.**

(Girl, 19, India)

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On the other hand, girls also highlight a number of safety concerns they and their family, friends and peers have about girls accessing phones. They feel that the phone can exacerbate existing risks that girls already experience in their everyday lives, and can also introduce new risks.

For example, phones not only facilitate desired relationships, allowing girls and boys to communicate, but they also put girls at risk of unwanted attention from men and boys.

In many places, girls say that men and boys' use of phones to harass them replicates their experiences in real life, for instance through constant phone calls, suggestive messages and threats of blackmail in the place of real life 'eve teasing'[4].

4. Eve teasing' is a common experience of women and girls in India and Bangladesh and involves men and boys making unwanted sexual remarks or advances in a public place.
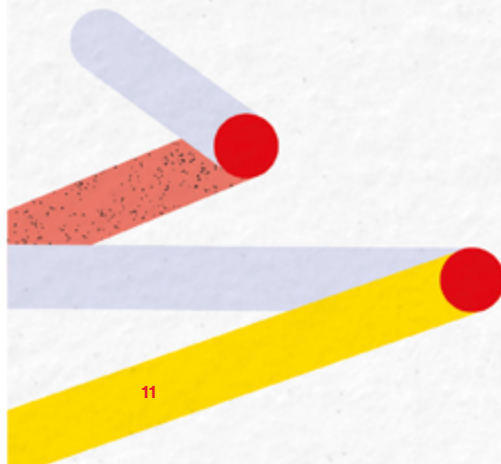
# Key finding 3:
## Many challenges stand in her path (cont.)

**...It will also be problematic for me when somebody harasses me, makes unwanted calls, sends weird messages on Facebook... It is for these reasons my parents do not allow me a personal mobile phone.**

(Girl, 19, India)

Parents' safety concerns may also be informed by the role of phones in girls' relationships with boys and men. Girls in our TEGA sample across Africa say that a quick way to access phones is through romantic or sexual relationships with more affluent boys and men, who will give them a phone. Additionally, girls also report that some of their female peers engage in more transactional relationships with boys or men in exchange for a phone. Some of these girls are coerced and some actively pursue sexual relationships with more affluent boys and men to obtain phones, as described by this 16 year old in Malawi.

**She can have a relationship with older men to give her money to buy a phone and also she can steal money or maize and sell it to get money and buy a phone.**

(Girl, 17, Malawi)

Whilst recognising that there are real risks experienced by girls using phones, girls who do not own phones are more likely to say that a phone would make them less safe than girls who own a phone. This suggests that girls who have less exposure to phones, and know less about their potential use, perceive their risks as higher than girls who have more direct experience of their benefits. Non-owners are potentially more likely to be living in households and communities that stress the negative aspects of phone use so may also be repeating the messages they hear from family members and friends about phones, rather than relaying real life examples of phones making them less safe.

**52% of girls have to borrow a mobile phone if they want access compared to 28% of boys[5]**

5. (TEGA data excluding USA, n=1,103)

# Where do we go from here?

This research has shown the opportunities that mobile phones can provide for girls. In order to support girls in accessing these opportunities and ensure they are not falling further behind their male peers, we need to close the mobile gender gap. This won't be easy, and will require a wide-ranging effort – which has informed the recommendations below.

**1**

## Forget assumptions about girls: access is changing and we need to keep up

A girl's journey to full mobile access is not linear, and is often shaped by aspects outside of her control. We need to recognise this complexity. Instead of limiting discussions to ownership, we need to ask 'when' and 'how' girls gain access - acknowledging that access to phones is often fluid and related to complex socio-economic factors. We also need to further explore the direction and causality of findings related to access, to better understand the relationships between girls' use of phones

**2**

## Take a holistic approach to addressing the mobile gender gap

Mobile phones do not exist in isolation from the societies in which they are used. This research illuminates the wide range of physical and social barriers to mobile that girls are often experiencing in their everyday lives. They can be most effectively addressed by taking a holistic approach, tackling multiple barriers simultaneously, through a combination of digital and non-digital means. A further implication of taking a holistic approach involves recognising that digital initiatives do not exist in a vacuum. It is important to think about how mobile phones can complement existing development agendas and remember that digital programmes or apps focused on single issues may not always have their intended impact.

# Where do we go from here? (cont.)

**3**

## Use mobile technology to support existing programming for adolescent girls

This study shows how more adolescent girls are finding ways to access mobile phones than might be expected according to existing research on whether girls 'have' or 'do not have' a mobile phone. Equally the study highlights how girls can use mobile for economic empowerment, for example managing money; education, for example learning digital skills and finishing school work; and gaining knowledge and information, for example on health.

Consequently, mobile could be a powerful tool to support development programmes that aim to reach adolescent girls at scale. However to do this most effectively, it will be important to consider and design for the potential complexity of girls' access. This involves understanding your target audience's mobile attitudes and behaviours. Factors to consider include: her frequency of access; type of handset (basic, feature, smart); ownership versus borrowership; gatekeeper permissions required; personal versus shared use; and her level of digital literacy.

**4**

## Rewrite literacy for the digital age

Girls are using phones, and often navigating a new online, digital space in secret or without guidance. When girls are learning new skills in an environment where they cannot rely on others for social support, there is a high risk that they will fall behind their male counterparts or experience negative consequences.

In an increasingly digital world, tech literacy is a crucial component of all education, and girls are at risk of falling behind if we don't invest in this. Support can take many forms, including integrating tech literacy and digital safety into school lessons for all students, as well as encouraging broader acceptance of mobile phones amongst families and communities.

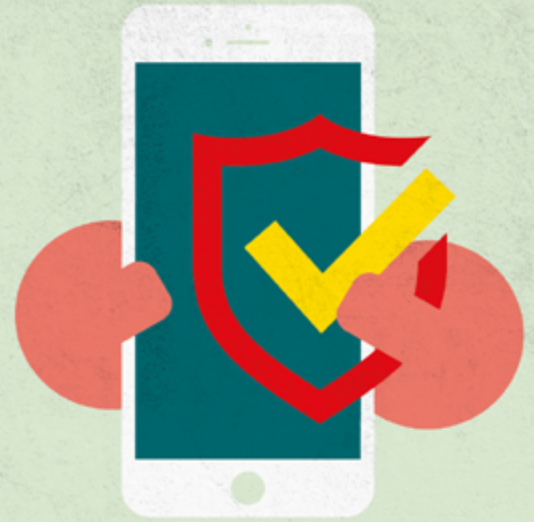# Where do we go from here? (cont.)

**5**

## Design for online safety

Girls everywhere want their online experiences to be safer, but feel they lack the knowledge to deal effectively with bullying and harassment. Across all device types, it needs to be easier for girls to block and report unwanted attention - allowing safe navigation of the digital space. Tech literacy programmes are important in building understanding here. When designing digital platforms, we also need to make special consideration for users who borrow phones. We must design experiences that are safe for girls with intermittent access to different devices. This includes understanding the safety cues that girls are familiar with, and incorporating these consistently into product and service design.

**6**

## Involve potential gatekeepers, including men and boys

Men and boys often have greater access to phones than girls and women, and in a range of countries, also act as gatekeepers to girls' and women's mobile access.

However they are often left out of the conversation when it comes to mobile access and safety. Special attention should be made to family permissions related to mobile phones, as gatekeepers also vary across countries. Demonstrating to gatekeepers how phones can practically improve girls' lives could be an effective way to increase permissibility, encouraging productive and supportive uses of mobile phones. Supporting gatekeepers to understand how to mitigate the risks of access could also help to alleviate their concerns.

# Where do we go from here? (cont.)

**7**

## Design mobile platforms from the users' perspective

Although designers create mobile phones with particular intentions in mind, and this may influence their users, people tend to use phones for what they find most interesting, engaging and important to them personally.

From a girl's perspective, the phone is a valuable tool for communication, entertainment and sometimes information, but not necessarily a tool for engaging with specific learning outcomes or behaviour change.

It is crucial to design with this user perspective in mind, and capitalise on the phone's entertainment and communication functions. This involves meeting the user where she is in her level and type of phone use. For example, if she is intimidated by the written word, and prefers audio/visual formats, think about how to support this functionality for her. If she only uses the phone to play games, think about how to gamify her mobile internet experience. If she is only using one or two platforms, and is not a confident tech explorer, think about how to link your services to these platforms.

**8**

## One size doesn't fit all

Even in communities where some girls have smartphone access, others will be borrowing basic phones for basic functions. When you design, consider the diversity of your audience and the ways they interact with phones.

SMS and other less-advanced solutions may be better for some situations, whereas capitalising on social media or online sites may be more useful in other circumstances. Alongside this, we need to recognise that access and use is continuously changing. As new technologies are introduced and more people gain greater access, technology is being used in new and diverse ways. Mobile platforms need to be continuously re-evaluated, in order to both adapt to the new realities that girls are experiencing as well as to continue achieving their intended impacts.

**9**

## Support girls to expand their own digital horizons, as the possibilities for co-creation are infinite

Girls are better placed than anyone else to design tech solutions to improve their own lives. They must play key roles in designing new digital solutions and interventions for girls, and tackling the challenging interplay between context, access, and usage. However, girls don't know what they don't know. They can't imagine new uses, or new technology configurations if they do not know the potential of mobile phones. We need to increase girls' tech literacy - from daily use of phones, to coding ideas and interventions - and enable access to spark creativity and ideas generation.

# Two Tanzanian girls with different levels of mobile access

The following case study focuses on two girls interviewed by TEGAs in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The examples were chosen to illustrate the differences between a typical owner and borrower, which are a reflection of their circumstances.
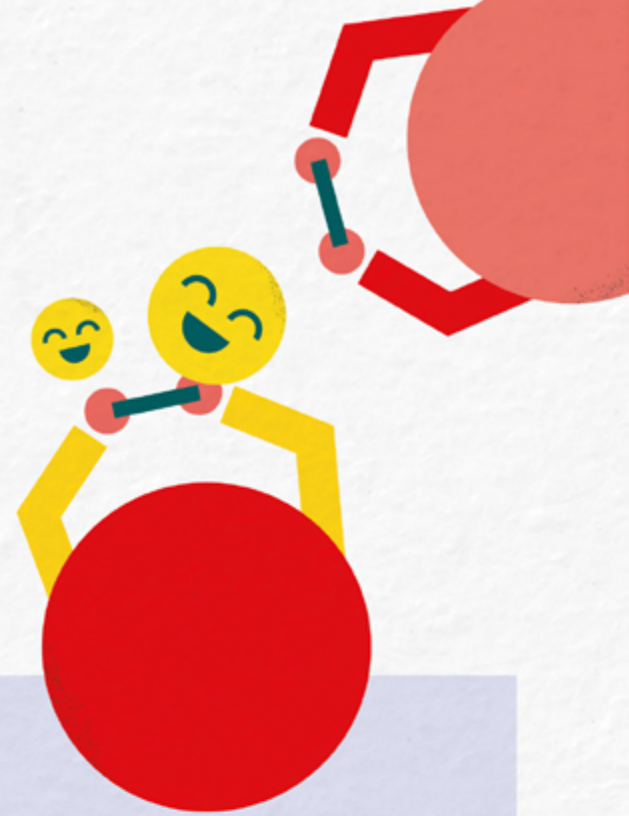
## Irene, 15, Temeke, Tanzania

Irene is 15 years old and currently in primary school. She lives in Temeke, which is a densely populated area with poor infrastructure in Dar es Salaam, with her parents, younger sister and two older brothers living together in one room.

Irene doesn't own a phone but instead borrows from her friend, Grace, a few times a week. She uses it to make calls, mainly to her boyfriend but also to friends and relatives who live outside the city.

She says using the phone makes her, '…feel safe and free. If I don't use a mobile I feel lonely. For example, when I miss my boyfriend and I don't have a mobile phone, I'm always down'.

Irene's parents refuse to buy her a phone as they are worried it will compromise her safety as girls do not 'understand themselves' and are not able to look after themselves in the way boys can.

They are most concerned that a phone may lead Irene to boys and men and then to sex and are unaware that she uses Grace's phone to contact her existing boyfriend. Irene herself says girls can become 'silly' when they get a phone and believes girls should use phones responsibly.

Emmanuel, Irene's 16 year old brother, owns a basic phone he bought himself after saving up money when he worked on a local building site. His parents don't keep tabs on his whereabouts like Irene, so he's allowed to use the phone as he pleases.

If she could own her own phone, Irene says she would use it for chatting with friends, family and her boyfriend as well as watching videos and movies. She'd also like to use the phone to help her schoolwork, although she's not totally clear how a phone can do this!

# Happy, 19, Temeke, Tanzania

Happy is 19 years old and lives with her husband in Temeke, Dar es Salaam. Her husband bought her a Lenovo A1000 smartphone when they got married last year. Now she stays at home whilst her husband works at a small shop ('duka') selling household items nearby.

Happy uses her phone every day, checking out friends and celebrities on Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook. She reads news and downloads pictures and videos which she shares with her husband and friends. Her phone makes her feel connected, entertained and alleviates loneliness and boredom.

It also makes her feel safe, especially as she is often home alone when her husband is working late.

Whilst she loves her phone and says it has made her life easier, Happy believes both girls and boys should be 18 before they own a phone. This is because younger teens are not mature enough to use phones responsibly.

Happy has seen her friends experience pressure to own a phone and recognizes that sometimes girls can steal, or start relationships with men in order to gain a phone.

She sees the main barrier to phone ownership as cost, which means boys locally are more likely to own a phone as they have more access to 'piece meal' work and can then save up to buy their own phones.

If she knew how, Happy says she would use her phone to find jobs or start her own business but she's not sure where to go to find the information she wants.

## Happy's phone makes her feel connected, entertained and alleviates loneliness.

# Partners

Girl Effect is a creative non-profit that uses media and mobile technology to empower girls to change their lives. Founded by the Nike Foundation in 2004, Girl Effect is active in 66 countries and has reached more than 48 million people through youth brands and mobile platforms that millions of young people love and interact with. Our work helps girls to express themselves, value themselves, and build the relationships they need. Girl Effect is a UK Registered Charity (1141155).

Vodafone Foundation is 'Connecting for Good', combining Vodafone's charitable giving and technology to make a difference in the world. Globally, the Vodafone Foundation (UK registered charity number 1089625) supports projects that are focused on delivering public benefit through the application of technology across the areas of health, education and disaster relief. The Vodafone Foundation invests in the communities in which Vodafone operates and is at the centre of a network of global and local social investment programmes.

Vodafone Foundation has impacted the lives of over 800,000 women and girls through multiple programmes including: life-saving emergency transport for pregnant women; support and surgery to women with obstetric fistula; community health care to pregnant and postpartum women; and access to testing and treatment for HIV+ mothers and children.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Vodafone Foundation or Vodafone Group Plc.

Methodological guidance and advising have been provided by MIT D-Lab Research Scientist, Elizabeth Hoffecker, who is a co-founder of the Lean Research approach and an expert in mixed-methods data collection and analysis.
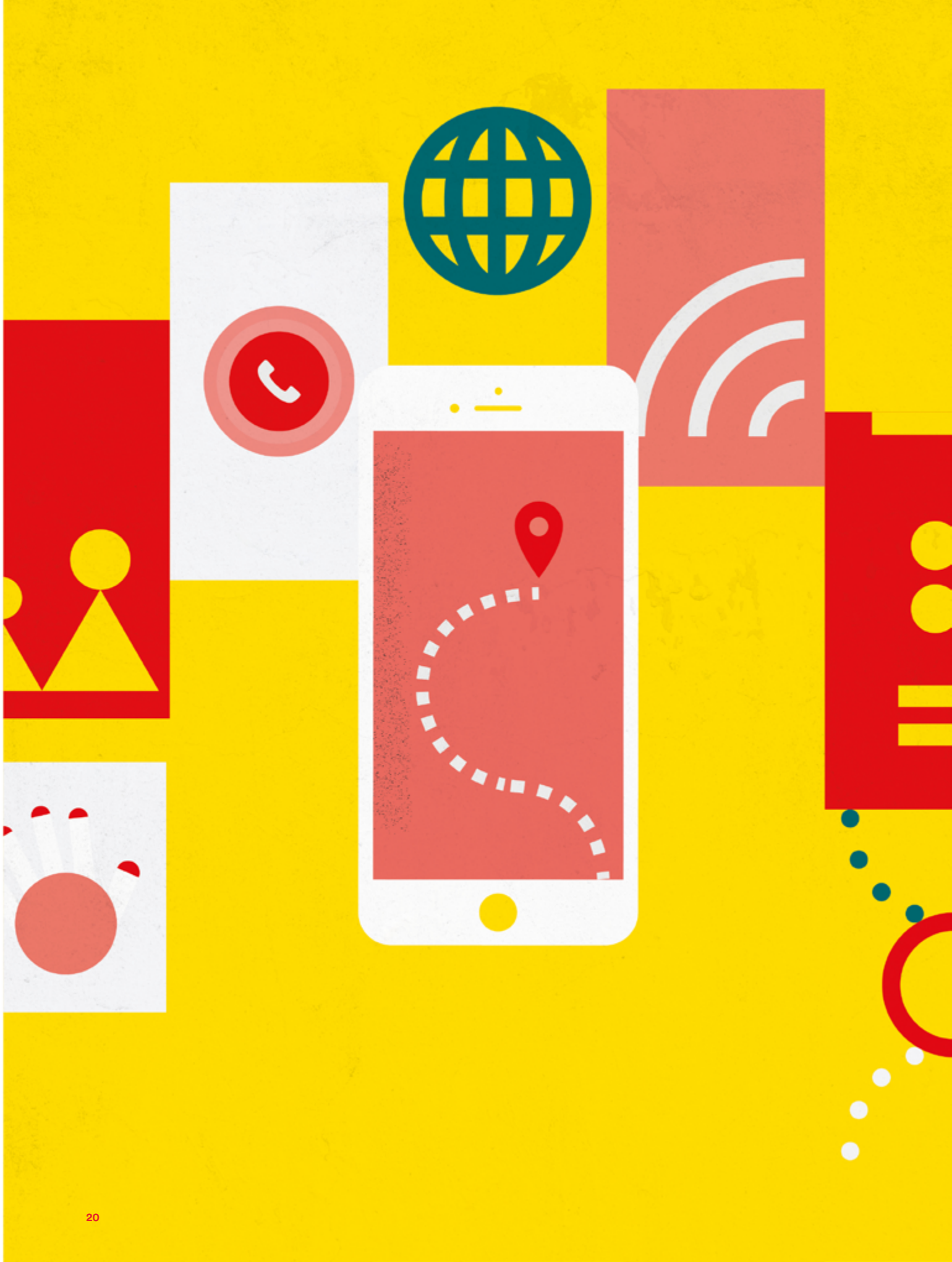
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