

# Mentorship as the Bridge Between Access and Agency

How the N50 Project and Food for the Hungry are closing the digital gender divide, one relationship at a time.



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## Introduction

Nearly a billion women across the developing world remain disconnected from the full potential of digital technology, and the gap is not closing. Despite the importance of digital engagement, women are still being left behind in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, artificial intelligence (AI) development, and leadership, with projections suggesting it could take 134 years to achieve full gender parity, according to the World Economic Forum’s [annual report](#) tracking the advancement of women and girls in society.

“The digital gender divide is not a marginal issue; it is directly tied to access to essential services, economic participation, and broader development outcomes,” observes Claire Sibthorpe, head of Digital Inclusion in the Mobile for Development (M4D) team at the GSMA, a global industry association representing over 750 mobile network operators.

In low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs), “women are 14% less likely than men to use mobile internet,” with the largest gaps in South Asia, where “women are 32% less likely.” In Sub-Saharan Africa, the gap is 29%, Sibthorpe adds. Progress in closing this gender gap stalled in 2024, according to GSMA’s [Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025](#), which found that 885 million women are still not using mobile internet across LMICs, approximately 60% of whom reside in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet closing the gender digital divide could generate an estimated USD 1.5 trillion boost to global GDP by 2030 and lift 30 million women out of poverty by 2050, according to [UN](#)

[Women](#). In addition, GSMA [analysis](#) estimates that from 2023 to 2030, closing the gender gap in mobile internet adoption in LMICs would add USD 1.3 trillion in GDP. The economic case for action is clear. But economic arguments alone have not moved the needle, because the barriers are not primarily technical.

This is the challenge that the N50 Project’s For WomenKind initiative has set out to address and in doing so, has arrived at a transformative insight: mentorship is the bridge between access and agency. It is not enough to hand a woman a device or a data plan. What changes trajectories is a trusted relationship with someone who says, ‘You belong here.’

*“Digital confidence isn’t just about having a device—it’s about having someone in your corner who believes you belong in digital spaces.”*

— Erin Bown-Anderson, PhD, Executive Director, N50 Project

*N50’s thesis is simple yet powerful: Strengthening women’s digital skills and networks strengthens entire communities.*

## Foundational Partners

The **N50 Project** is a global movement of more than 250 organizations and one million technology employees united by a common purpose: ending digital poverty. Realizing that no single company or solution can solve the digital poverty crisis, N50 brings together a coalition of technology companies, nonprofits, and international development organizations to

deliver real and holistic solutions to communities around the globe.

**For WomenKind** is one of N50's flagship initiatives, a global mentorship program that connects professional women volunteers with women and girls in underserved communities across the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Uganda and additional communities over time. The program blends a global online mentoring platform with targeted digital-skills supports, aiming to boost women's digital confidence and economic opportunity worldwide. For WomenKind recognizes that for women without reliable connectivity, devices, or relevant digital content, the digital gender gap is even more severe, cutting women off not only from jobs and services, but from professional networks and role models.

**Food for the Hungry (FH)** is the founding "Powered by" partner of For WomenKind. As a global Christian humanitarian and development organization working in more than 20 countries, FH brings deep community roots, trusted local relationships, and decades of experience serving those most affected by poverty and marginalization. FH serves as the field implementation partner for the For WomenKind program—recruiting and orienting mentees, providing local facilitation, and ensuring that this global digital initiative is grounded in the lived realities of the communities it serves.

This partnership between a global digital coalition and a trusted community development organization is not incidental; it is the architecture of the program. Without FH's presence, For WomenKind would be a platform without roots. Without N50's global network, FH's community women would lack access to the world-class mentors and digital tools that can change their trajectories.

**MENTEE** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting marginalized populations through mentorship and supportive programs, for life. They serve as the platform infrastructure and in-depth training behind the For WomenKind program, with wrap around programs that include monthly mental health sessions, professional development and more. MENTEE connects women mentors and mentees from across the world providing trusted access to learning and support, and broader global mentors and the knowledge systems they carry. Without MENTEE's relational platform, training, and supportive program, the global reach of For WomenKind would not be possible.

## Gender Inequity: A Barrier Across Multiple Fronts

GSMA's Sibthorpe agrees that the digital gender divide is not a niche problem, but a central barrier across multiple fronts, preventing inclusive growth and gender equality:

- **A development issue:** It affects access to health, education, finance, and information for women who are already the most marginalized.
- **An economic issue:** Closing the gap could generate trillions in GDP and lift millions out of poverty, yet progress has stalled—and the costs of inaction are compounding. (See GDP impact statistics in the Introduction above.)
- **A gender equality issue:** Structural inequalities, social norms, affordability, literacy, and safety concerns all intersect to keep women offline.
- **A policy and practice issue:** Without gender-intentional, data-driven, and large-scale interventions—and broader cross-sector action—the gap is unlikely to close.

GSMA's data identifies affordability, literacy, and digital skills as the most significant barriers, compounded by social norms and structural inequalities.

### Progress has Stalled

According to Sibthorpe, the mobile internet gender gap in the LMICs has been closing steadily, but in 2021 progress stalled and, in some years, even widened slightly.

*"This stalled gender gap just shows that things aren't going to close on their own. We absolutely need focused, targeted action... [and] a gender-intentional approach to address these barriers systematically."*

— Claire Sibthorpe, GSMA

That conclusion is shared by Revi Sterling, deputy director of CARE's Digital Impact Hub, who notes that the digital development sector has historically over-valued connectivity and under-valued women's agency. Failure rates for digital development projects, she observes, have hovered around 80% for years—a number Sterling attributes to a narrow, technical definition of success that measures internet access rather than what women can actually do with it.

For women, especially in rural and conservative communities, the decisive barrier is no longer network coverage "but whether they are allowed, supported, and confident enough to use digital tools in the first place," Sterling says.

From her perspective, the “last two billion” people offline—disproportionately women—are being held back by deeply entrenched social norms and safety risks, not just infrastructure gaps. Even where mobile networks and devices exist, many women face community rules, religious edicts, or family control that prohibit them from owning or using phones. In such contexts, CARE’s experience shows that it is not enough to train women alone; effective digital programs must engage the entire household and community—husbands, in-laws, elders—and demonstrate how technology can benefit families and livelihoods, not just individual women.

## Mentorship: The Bridge Between Access and Agency

For WomenKind’s response to these barriers is not simply to provide devices or data plans, but to provide relationships. The program operates on the conviction that mentorship is the critical infrastructure that helps women not just get online, but

navigate, contribute, and lead in digital spaces. Access without agency leaves women vulnerable; agency built through trusted mentorship relationships creates lasting change.

What makes For WomenKind distinctive is the ecosystem of partners assembled to make that bridge real. No single organization could deliver this model alone. Food for the Hungry provides the community roots and trusted local presence that connect women to the program in the first place. MENTEE provides the relational platform that connects mentors and mentees across borders. TranslateLive dissolves language as a barrier. Learning Upgrade builds foundational digital skills so women can participate more fully. And Digital Promise ensures that the growth women achieve is formally recognized and credentialed, giving them something tangible to carry forward. Together, these partners form a coherent system: community, connection, communication, skills, recognition.

### The Community Anchor

The For WomenKind model is only as strong as its community grounding—and that grounding is provided by Food for the Hungry. FH’s local offices in the Dominican Republic, Kenya, and Uganda serve as the program’s community anchor—ensuring that global digital tools and mentorship relationships are introduced in ways that are culturally appropriate, locally trusted, and practically supported.

#### Local FH staff:

- Run orientation workshops for prospective mentees
- Help mentees understand the platform and what mentorship can offer
- Provide an on-the-ground support network that contextualizes the digital program in each community

This hybrid design—global platform plus local facilitation by FH—makes mentoring both culturally relevant and sustainable. It is Food for the Hungry’s presence that transforms an online program into a community-rooted one. As Sterling’s research makes clear, programs that engage only the individual woman, without engaging her community context, rarely achieve lasting impact. FH’s model of embedded community partnership is precisely what For WomenKind needs to reach women who are furthest from digital spaces.

*"At Food for the Hungry, we believe lasting change happens when women are seen, supported, and equipped to lead their own journeys. We partner with N50 to support the For WomenKind mentorship program because mentorship is more than guidance; it is a catalyst for change. It creates space for women to discover their voice, build confidence, and step into their potential, sparking a ripple effect that transforms their lives, families, and communities"*

— Kate Musimwa, Chief Program & Public Resources Officer, Food for the Hungry

### The Relational Platform

The MENTEE platform features purpose-built tools for cross-cultural mentorship: mentor profiles and matching by experience, language, and expertise; built-in messaging and video for secure initial connections; and flexible channels that allow pairs to connect in the most accessible options for mentees in the field. All mentors receive trauma-informed training, creating a baseline of psychological safety. They receive cross-cultural training to strengthen their relationships, and feminine mentorship training to assure mutual growth and a nonhierarchical community. Bown-Anderson describes this as a "relationship

infrastructure" running underneath any specific technology stack, a human network of support, advice, and encouragement that helps women navigate education, work, and digital life. (Read firsthand accounts on the impact of this program for both mentor and mentees in the Testimonial section.)

*"At MENTEE, we believe that the greatest barrier to human flourishing has never been a lack of potential, but a lack of access. We believe the systems we've inherited were not built for everyone. So we built something different: a world where the person with the least institutional power holds all of the power over their own journey and can choose their own mentors, define their own path, and be supported - for life."*

— Letitia Zwickert, Founder and CEO, MENTEE

## Language Access

TranslateLive is an N50 partner supporting the For WomenKind program. Each mentor receives access to a license for this real-time AI-powered language access platform, which enables instant, multi-directional communication in over 200 languages and dialects across any device or setting. Its flagship product, the Instant Language Assistant (ILA), combines AI translation with the option to connect live certified interpreters, ensuring that communication is not only fast but accurate and inclusive. For the For WomenKind program, TranslateLive's technology addresses one of the most persistent barriers to cross-cultural mentorship—language—making it possible for mentors and mentees across different countries to connect meaningfully regardless of what language they speak.

## Foundational Skills

Mentees can also access Learning Upgrade, an N50 partner who had developed an educational technology platform that delivers personalized, online courses in English, math, digital literacy, and job skills through an engaging format of songs, video, and games—designed specifically to reach underserved learners who may lack access to traditional classrooms, computers, or transportation. With over 1,500 lessons available on any smart device, the platform serves more than 3 million children and adults across 25+ countries, including refugees, immigrants, and low-income communities who can learn at their own pace from wherever they are. For the For WomenKind program, Learning Upgrade's mobile-accessible, skills-building approach directly supports the digital confidence goals of N50 mentees—providing a scalable, low-barrier pathway for women and girls to build foundational competencies that open doors to education, employment, and greater economic participation.

## Micro Credentials

Completing a mentorship journey is a meaningful achievement—and For WomenKind believes it deserves formal recognition. In partnership with Digital Promise (N50 Partner), a nonprofit organization dedicated to accelerating innovation in education, N50 offers micro-credentials to both mentors and mentees upon completion of the For WomenKind program. These digital badges, available for both the Mentor and Mentee pathways, are earned by demonstrating competencies, including self-awareness, leadership, communication, and digital engagement. Participants complete their mentorship cycle, document their interactions, and submit a final reflection for review by subject matter experts. If the evidence demonstrates competence, they earn a shareable digital badge hosted on the Digital Promise platform.

"This isn't just a certificate," as Bown-Anderson has described it. "It's a sharable symbol that you are part of a global movement of women and allies supporting each other." For women in emerging economies who may lack formal credentials, a digitally verifiable badge recognizing skills like leadership and cross-cultural communication can be a meaningful addition to a professional profile and a tangible signal to employers of capabilities that were previously invisible.

## Digital Confidence, Safety & Skills

Beyond the mentorship relationships, N50 is systematically building digital confidence into the model. Its latest enhancement, Digital Confidence Conversation Starters, features short, practical videos that serve as shared prompts for mentor-mentee pairs to watch and discuss together. For example, mentor Andrea Hilton has developed micro-learning videos on crafting a strong LinkedIn profile and highlighting soft skills on a resume.

The videos provide an accessible, conversation-starting resource to help mentees grow their digital skills and confidence. Mentors are encouraged to “go where the mentee is” using the video conference tool in MENTEE or familiar tools like WhatsApp to share content and discuss it together. This approach makes the learning experience low-friction and contextually relevant for each woman.

The program also acknowledges that online visibility can be dangerous in some political contexts. Mentors are trained to weigh digital exposure and privacy carefully, especially for women in repressive environments, and to integrate safety and harm-reduction strategies into mentoring when needed.

## Scaling the Program

*“N50 represents more than a million tech employees from N50 partner organizations. If even a fraction of them became mentors, we could fundamentally change what it means for a woman to step into digital spaces, with someone already there saying, ‘You belong here.’”*

— Erin Bown-Anderson, PhD, Executive Director, N50 Project

Around 98 mentors are currently involved in the program from N50, says Bown-Anderson, explaining that the organization plans to scale that number as more corporate partners invite employees to participate. One corporate member, Cisco Systems, embraced the For WomenKind mentorship program early on. The Silicon Valley critical infrastructure and AI company positioned the program as an opportunity for Cisco employees to volunteer as mentors.

Cisco can serve as a model for how other large companies could participate. (See testimonial below on Cisco mentor Andrea Hilton.)

The program is designed to respond to a persistent gap: most women have never had a formal mentor, despite strong evidence that mentorship drives career success. Research from the [Anita Borg Institute](#) finds that women in tech with mentors are 77% more likely to still be in the industry after three years. WomenTech Network [reports](#) that 63% of women report never having had a formal mentor themselves, but 75% of executive women credit their mentors as the significant factor in their career success.

Experts see significant promise in the convergence of mentorship, AI, and low-barrier digital tools to unlock women’s economic engagement.

## Voices from the Program

MENTOR SPOTLIGHT · CISCO · CANADA

**Andrea Hilton** *Technical Content Leader, Cisco*

*“The most rewarding part is seeing mentees grow in confidence...seeing them achieve their goals. They tell me that these conversations were the spark they were waiting for and what they needed to move forward.”*

— Andrea Hilton, Cisco

Andrea Hilton, a leader of technical content at Cisco in Canada, has connected with about 12 For WomenKind Program mentees over the past year, offering everything from emotional support to career strategy.



*Sometimes it feels like an impossible goal, or the mountain is just way too high. And then we set these little goals for these small changes today that will make a huge impact tomorrow.*

— Andrea Hilton, Cisco

Many of her mentees have overcome significant life challenges to achieve their goals. “One mentee has successfully ended a marriage. Another one has successfully integrated into a new job, while another one has left her country and is in the process of obtaining a visa. Lastly, another one was accepted here to Canada, to a university, mostly on a full scholarship,” Hilton says.

Working with international women—many in Afghanistan and other high-risk regions—has sharpened Hilton’s understanding of both cultural barriers and shared human hopes. “Mentoring across borders has really opened my eyes to some of the difficulties and some of the basic human rights issues. As a [trauma] survivor myself, I’ve seen how universal our hopes are—what we want for ourselves and [our] children.”



*Confidence...is a huge barrier—it’s often our own inner voice telling us we can’t.*

— Andrea Hilton, Cisco

Hilton builds practical digital skills for her mentees, focusing on LinkedIn, résumés, and safe remote work. She has created two short, three-minute Digital Confidence Conversation Starters videos—one on filling in a résumé with soft skills when you don’t have experience, and one on creating a LinkedIn profile. Despite connectivity challenges and security risks, Hilton adapts by recording sessions, sharing materials via WhatsApp and Google Drive, and keeping expectations flexible.

## MENTEE STORY · AFGHANISTAN

**Miriam** *Online college student, age 21 (pseudonym)*

*“I really appreciate that I have [my mentor]. I’m so lucky to have this opportunity.”*

— Miriam, For WomenKind mentee, Afghanistan

### Pursuing Education despite Laws Depriving Women and Girls of Basic Rights

As an Afghan online college student, Miriam (a pseudonym), 21, knows firsthand the obstacles girls and women face in securing education as a pathway for a professional career and economic freedom.

“I had many challenges and was in a very bad situation,” says Miriam, who was 17 when the Taliban reclaimed power over Afghanistan in August 2021. Since then, the hardline faction has issued over 70 edicts and directives that systematically strip women and girls of their fundamental rights, creating what the UN describes as the world’s most severe women’s rights crisis. As of early 2026, new regulations effectively legalized domestic violence and banned women from nearly all public spaces.

Despite these grim realities, Miriam has a supportive large family that believes in education for all their children, regardless of gender. She is studying business online and plans to pursue a PhD. She says working with a For WomenKind mentor has made a major difference, helping her find ways to cope and improve her skills and confidence with professors.



*I was a bit shy when I started at my university, and my mentor told me to go ahead and share my ideas in class and not think about judgements.*

— Miriam, For WomenKind mentee, Afghanistan

She put her mentor’s advice into practice and now finds she has a strong relationship with her professor. She’s looking at opportunities to continue her education.

## MENTEE STORY · KENYA

**Faith** *Value Exchange Coordinator, Food for the Hungry (pseudonym)*

*“She always reminded me of my potential... your contribution is enough and you belong somewhere, your voice belongs in the global space, so don’t let anyone dim your light.”*

— Faith, For WomenKind mentee, Kenya

**From Overwhelmed to ‘Voice in the Global Space’**

Faith (a pseudonym), a value exchange coordinator with Food for the Hungry in northern Kenya, exemplifies the transformative impact of the N50 For WomenKind mentorship program. Her professional role centers on stewarding the relationship between sponsors and vulnerable children, ensuring that support reaches those who need it most.



*The most fulfilling aspect is ensuring quality, timely delivery of the communication deliverables between the child and the sponsor... You can literally feel the emotions in those deliberate communications.*

— Faith, For WomenKind mentee, Kenya

When Faith was promoted into her current position, she suddenly shifted from working alongside field staff to supervising them. She entered the For WomenKind program at a moment of uncertainty, feeling “blank,” overwhelmed by new leadership responsibilities, and conscious of the complex realities facing the women she serves: arid regions affected by climate change, entrenched gender norms, low digital literacy, and limited connectivity.

Her mentor relationship became a critical source of stability and confidence. Rather than offering only transactional career advice, Faith’s mentor provided ongoing, relational support, listening without judgment, following up consistently, and affirming her voice in a global context.

This encouragement has directly shaped how Faith now leads: she is more confident in her supervisory role, more intentional about inclusion, and more vocal in advocating for tools that would help rural women—such as translation support, accessible digital platforms, and better mentor–mentee matching by skill and topic.

Faith’s experience demonstrates the core value of N50 For WomenKind: with relatively simple digital channels like WhatsApp and video calls, the program creates deep, trust-based relationships that unlock leadership potential, especially for women working on the front lines of poverty, gender inequality, and climate vulnerability.

**A Vision of Systemic Change**

By braiding together a global mentorship platform, Food for the Hungry’s community presence, trauma-informed human relationships, and a growing toolkit of digital confidence and safety resources, N50’s For WomenKind Initiative is testing a scalable model that sees technology not just as hardware or apps, but as access to human networks.

Mentorship, For WomenKind has learned, is the bridge between access and agency. Access opens a door. Agency means knowing you have the right to walk through it, and having someone beside you who has already been there. For WomenKind not only is connecting women to technology but also fostering the support systems within digital spaces that help women belong, contribute, and lead.

If it reaches the scale of hundreds of thousands as Bown-Anderson envisions, the initiative could help reshape the trajectories of women and the communities that depend on them, across the globe.

**Learn More**

For WomenKind is actively seeking to grow both partners and the number of mentors in its innovative mentorship program. Interested organizations can learn more at: <https://n50project.org/for-womenkind/>

## About the Author



Anne Wainscott-Sargent is an entrepreneur, author and award-winning tech and science writer, covering the advances redefining communications, space, aviation, defense and biomedicine, among other sectors. For over 25 years, her communications consultancy has elevated the thought leadership of leading academic institutes, associations, nonprofits and tech startups. The Dayton, Ohio, native earned her B.S. in Journalism from Ohio University and is a member of the National Association of Science Writers. She is a two-time book author – writing an anti-smoking memoir in 2005 dedicated to her mother and aunt who both succumbed to lung cancer, and an “un-tourist” moving guide in 2016 about the neighborhoods, institutions and other dynamics that make Atlanta a magnet for creatives and Fortune 500 firms.

## About N50 Project

Realizing that one single company, or one solution or product cannot solve the digital poverty crisis, a group of technology companies and professionals came together to bring real and holistic solutions to communities around the globe. In just a few short years, we are a coalition of more than 250 companies and 1 million tech employees working to solve this problem.

## About For WomenKind Initiative

Creating a world where women and girls have the same opportunities and are not exploited with technology. Through mentorships, digital resources, and championing women leaders, we’re working to ensure women can participate safely in the digital age. Get involved: [n50project.org/get-involved](https://n50project.org/get-involved)

## About Food for the Hungry

Food for the Hungry is a global Christian humanitarian and development organization serving those in greatest need. FH works in partnership with local communities and global coalitions to address root causes of poverty through programs in health, education, economic development, and disaster response. FH is the founding “Powered by” partner of the For WomenKind Initiative. Learn more at [fh.org](https://fh.org)