

MEDIA RELEASE

Closing the gender digital divide: Reliance Foundation, USAID invite grant applications for WomenConnect Challenge India Round Two

- WomenConnect Challenge India aims to empower women through digital technology.
- Over 3 lakh women are set to benefit from Round One of the challenge.
- Reliance Foundation will provide up to INR 10 crore (over \$1.2 million USD) in grants for Round Two of the WomenConnect Challenge India initiative.
- Eligible non-profit organisations can apply for grants until 11.59 pm IST, November 14, 2022.

Washington, D.C. / Mumbai, October 12, 2022: Building on their efforts to narrow the gender digital divide and empower women in India, Reliance Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), today announced the launch of the WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) India Round Two and are calling for grant applications. Reliance Foundation will provide up to INR 10 crore in grants for up to 10 organisations (up to INR 1 crore for each grantee) to implement innovative solutions over 12-15 months.

The WomenConnect Challenge is a global call for solutions to improve women's participation in everyday life by meaningfully changing the ways women access and use technology. WomenConnect Challenge India aims to identify and support solutions that bridge the gender digital divide in India. Round One of WCC India began in August 2021 with the selection of 10 grantee organisations that are implementing solutions in 17 Indian states. Over 3 lakh (300,000) women and girls will have benefited from the initiatives of the first round.

Emphasising the importance of women's access to digital technologies in their empowerment journey, **Mrs Nita Ambani, Founder and Chairperson, Reliance Foundation**, said, "We have seen how digital technologies can empower women and amplify the positive ripple effect of their transformation. Enthused by the outcomes of the first round of WomenConnect Challenge India, we are stepping up our commitment to bridge the gender digital gap with the second round of the challenge, in partnership with USAID. With India set to have one billion smartphone users by 2026, it is important that women's access also increases in proportion to this surge. When women rise, they help families flourish, communities grow, and nations prosper."

USAID Mission Director in India, Veena Reddy, said, "Investing in women and girls is essential to transforming communities and nations. This collaboration will support new pathways for women and girls in India to engage with technology, counter outdated social norms, and increase their economic independence."

From classrooms in rural areas of Bihar that are bringing women and girls into the digital fold, to digitally integrating women dairy farmers in Uttar Pradesh into formal supply chains, grantees of WCC India Round One have focused on several avenues for women's empowerment. These include building entrepreneurship skills, digital literacy, edutainment-based courses, mentoring and value-chain linkages support for agriculture.

In India, the proportion of women having a mobile phone that they themselves use increased from 45.9 percent to 54 percent over the past four years. However, the differences between women and men in access to mobile phones and the internet, key indicators of the gender digital divide, remain significant and need to be lowered to realise development goals. To bridge this divide, Reliance Foundation and USAID will continue nurturing solutions that meaningfully improve women's access to digital technology for an inclusive and equitable future. USAID's South Asia Regional Digital Initiative (SARDI) will continue to support the WomenConnect Community of Practice, and help bring learnings from previous rounds, including from other countries.

Reliance Foundation's initiatives to empower women include leadership capacity building, digital literacy, employment and skills development, improving women's health and enhancing women's opportunities in education, sports and arts. Through Jio, Reliance is revolutionising digital connectivity in India by connecting the unconnected. *Aspirations, Access & Agency: Women Transforming Lives with Technology*, a [recent publication](#) of Reliance Foundation and Observer Research Foundation highlights the stories of women who are transforming their communities using digital technologies and demonstrates the tremendous potential that can be unlocked by closing the gender digital divide.

WCC India will accept applications for Round Two until 11.59 pm IST, 14 November, 2022, from eligible organisations. For details please visit: <https://womenconnectindia.com/>

About Reliance Foundation

Reliance Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Reliance Industries Limited, aims to play a catalytic role in addressing the India's development challenges through innovative and sustainable solutions. Led by Founder and Chairperson Smt. Nita Ambani, Reliance Foundation is relentlessly working to facilitate transformative changes for the overall wellbeing and higher quality of life for all. Reliance Foundation is focused on addressing the nation's development challenges in rural transformation, education, health, sports for development, disaster management, women empowerment, urban renewal and arts, culture and heritage, and has touched the lives of more than 64 million people across India, in more than 53,000 villages and several urban locations. For more information, please visit <https://www.reliancefoundation.org/>

About USAID

USAID is the world's premier international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results. USAID works to help lift lives, build communities, advance democracy, and champions the cause of women empowerment across the globe. USAID's work advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity; demonstrates American generosity; and helps countries progress along their development journey.

To date, USAID has 16 WomenConnect Challenge grantees in three different rounds working to address barriers limiting women's access to technology and connecting nearly 6 million women in 16 countries. WomenConnect Round One, in 2018, awarded nine grants and WomenConnect Round Two, awarded three in 2019. Four winners were announced for WomenConnect Round Three in 2021.