

Request for Proposal (RFP) Guidelines

Women's Economic Empowerment and Digital Connectivity (WEE-Connect) Research Initiative

Introduction

WEE-Connect, a BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University initiative made possible through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is requesting proposals for research projects that explore the barriers to digital inclusion that women face and that seek to identify the mechanisms through which digital connectivity interventions can advance women's empowerment.

This call for proposals is dedicated to funding **for the following categories:**

Large Grants

- **Large-Scale Greenfield Evaluations**
- **Extensions to Existing Studies**

Small Grants

- **Measurement Studies**
- **Qualitative Studies**
 - a. As Extensions to Existing Studies
 - b. As Formative or Standalone Research
- **Pilot Studies**
- **Secondary Data Analysis**

Teams may apply for a large grant in conjunction with a small grant (e.g., an extension study combined with a measurement study) using a single proposal. Teams may also apply for more than one funding category within the small grants categories (e.g., a pilot study combined with a qualitative study) using a single proposal. Maximum budgets may be combined across the relevant grant categories (e.g., an extension study combined with a measurement study may apply for a maximum of USD 250,000). Should teams apply for more than one category, the proposal must clearly state that both categories are being applied for in a single application.

The **RFP package**, which includes the white paper defining the scope of the initiative, technical and financial proposal guidelines/templates, letter of support guidelines, and the RFP document (this document), can be found [here](#).

The **completed proposal** should include:

1. Proposal cover sheet
2. Technical proposal
3. Budget and budget narrative
4. Up to five-page CVs of each Principal Investigator (PI)
5. Letter(s) of support.

Submit the completed proposal in a single PDF document. All applications and required documents should be submitted by **Tuesday, March 11th, 2025, 23:59 Bangladesh Standard Time** (5:59 pm GMT / 1:59 pm EST).

About BIGD

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University, is a Bangladesh-based social science research and academic institute dedicated to generating and sharing knowledge through education, research, and public and policy engagement in equitable partnerships with national and global actors.

We conduct rigorous, multi-method social science research, grounded in developing country operations, on a range of social and economic issues to promote practical, time-sensitive innovations for tackling governance and development challenges. Our research spans innovations taking place in government, non-profit, and private sectors for improving lives.

We deeply value knowledge that is solution-driven and rooted in local context so that we can contribute to the Southern-led process of charting our unique pathways to shared prosperity and sustainable development, our vision of knowledge for a better world.

We lead the research on the socioeconomic empowerment programs of BRAC—the global leader among NGOs focusing on poor and marginal people—including their ultra-poor graduation, integrated development, skills development, migration, microfinance, gender justice and diversity, community empowerment, climate change, humanitarian, and urban development programs. Further information can be found [here](#).

WEE-Connect

Digital connectivity promotes economic empowerment by providing access to information, economic opportunities, financial services, and flexible work options. However, a considerable gender gap in digital connectivity persists in the Global South. Women face barriers such as

limited access, device ownership, digital skills, gender stereotypes, and safety concerns.¹ It is essential to understand and address these barriers to foster a more inclusive digital society. Moreover, further research is required to better understand the mechanisms through which digital connectivity interventions can advance women’s empowerment. WEE-Connect aims to address these two gaps in empirical knowledge and ultimately guide the development of evidence-based strategies for fostering women’s empowerment in the digital era.

WEE-Connect leverages the framework established by BIGD’s WEE-DiFine Initiative to create a knowledge hub on digital connectivity and gender. Moreover, WEE-Connect intends to deepen and expand WEE-DiFine’s work to establish best-case practices with regard to inclusive funding. Specifically, both initiatives aim to influence policies and practices so that Southern researchers and institutions are treated as truly equal partners in the research landscape. Finally, WEE-Connect seeks to establish a scholarly community of practice for researchers exploring the intersection of digital connectivity and gender.

Topical Focus

Please consult our [WEE-Connect White Paper](#) to learn about the scope and the priority research questions of WEE-Connect. Only the proposals that are in a strong alignment with the scope and priorities of WEE-Connect will be considered for funding. Additionally, WEE-Connect’s Spring 2025 RFP prioritizes research that focuses on health-related use cases.

Categories of Funding

This call for proposals is dedicated to funding **for the following categories of work:**

¹ Cooper, J. (2006). The digital divide: The special case of gender. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 22(5), 320-334.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2006.00185.x>

Hilbert, M. (2011). Digital gender divide or technologically empowered women in developing countries? A typical case of lies, damned lies, and statistics. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 34(6), 479-489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2011.07.001>

Korupp, S., & Szydlik, M. (2005). Causes and trends of the digital divide. *European Sociological Review*, 21(4), 409-422.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jci030>

OECD. (2015a). *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. OECD.

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264229945-en>

OECD. (2018d). *Empowering Women in the Digital Age: Where Do We Stand?* [Brochure]. OECD.

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264293216-en>.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2018). *Bridging the digital gender divide: Include, upskill, innovate*. OECD.

Zahan, I. (2021). *Understanding the Digital Gender Divide in Rural Bangladesh: How Wide It Is and Why*. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. Retrieved from

https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Policy-Brief_Digital_gender_Divide_BIGD_2021.pdf

- **Large-scale Greenfield Evaluations:** Intended for Greenfield projects explicitly designed on strong theoretical grounding to target key questions in the Initiative’s research agenda. WEE-Connect will consider Greenfield grants up to **USD 500,000**.
- **Extensions to Existing Studies:** Intended to add extensions to existing experimental research designs that would yield results of central relevance to the Initiative’s research agenda. This tier of funding will enable researchers to add additional intervention arms or survey rounds, female strata to samples, and/or other extensions to existing study designs. WEE-Connect will consider extension grants up to **USD 200,000**.
- **Measurement Studies:** This funding category is meant to support measurement studies (including, but not limited to, developing novel measurement techniques or adapting an existing measure to a different cultural context or population) in field surveys. Indicators such as women’s economic empowerment are crucial for estimating important outcomes such as female agency and empowerment, intra-household bargaining power, control of household decision-making, etc. Measurement studies do not have to be associated with an RCT - they can be attached to any form of quantitative data collection. WEE-Connect will consider measurement study grants up to **USD 50,000**.

Before being peer-reviewed, submissions must demonstrate that 1) They have a skilled researcher(s) who are experts at measurement studies on their team (either as a PI or in another key role), and 2) There is clear potential for a publication-quality paper to emerge from the research.

- **Qualitative Studies:** Qualitative studies can be used to disentangle the causal mechanisms of an RCT or shed light on specific sub-themes in the Initiative’s white paper. This funding category has two sub-categories.
 1. *Qualitative Studies as Extensions to Existing Studies:* This subcategory is designed to “top-up” existing impact evaluations to encourage the inclusion of talented sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists who employ qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, in the research team to advance high-quality, mixed-method research. This funding sub-category is motivated by the recognition that rigorously investigated qualitative narratives about how and why interventions impact their subjects are essential but often omitted.
 2. *Qualitative Studies as Formative or Standalone Research:* This subcategory does not need to be attached to an existing project. This subcategory is designed to allow for pre-pilot qualitative research that may inform subsequent experimental evaluations or measurement studies to be conducted by the research team applying for funding or other teams exploring the pathways between digital connectivity and WEE. This funding sub-category is motivated by the need for high-quality, rigorous qualitative research that can inform the Initiative’s research agenda.

WEE-Connect will consider qualitative study grants up to **USD 50,000**. Applicants who receive funding under this category are eligible and encouraged to apply to future RFPs.

Before being peer-reviewed, submissions in both categories must demonstrate that 1) They have a skilled qualitative researcher on their team (either as a PI or in another key role) and 2) There is clear potential for a publication-quality paper to emerge from the research.

- **Pilot Studies:** These proposals are intended to stimulate early pilot fieldwork to explore promising opportunities for future large-scale projects. This tier of funding can also be used to support data acquisition and analysis of natural experiments where projects are consistent with the research agenda. WEE-Connect will consider pilot grants up to **USD 50,000**.

Before being peer-reviewed, submissions must demonstrate that 1) They have a skilled researcher(s) who are experts at RCTs on their team (either as a PI or in another key role) and 2) There is clear potential for a large-scale study to emerge from the research.

- **Secondary Data Analysis:** This category of funding is intended to primarily support staff and graduate student time needed to conduct analysis of existing high-quality, relevant datasets on gender and digital connectivity. It is expected that applicants to this category will not perform field work or primary data collection. WEE-Connect will consider secondary data analysis grants up to **USD 20,000**.

Eligibility

Researchers working in higher education or other research institutes are eligible to apply for funding through their institute. Graduate students working with a research advisor are also eligible to apply. We will only accept proposals submitted by an individual researcher who is not institutionally affiliated in exceptional circumstances in which the researcher has a demonstrated record of high-quality research.

A single institution is allowed to submit multiple proposals during the same call for proposals. A single researcher can also be included in more than one proposal. If multiple proposals are submitted, the researcher and/or institutions involved should have the capacity to conduct the research according to the proposed timelines.

Institutions can apply as a single institution as well as in partnership with multiple institutions. In case of a partnership, one institution must be identified as the lead institution, which will be responsible for submitting the proposal. Only the lead institute will have a contract with BIGD and will be responsible for the successful delivery of the project.

Preference

WEE-Connect prefers that proposals meet the following criteria:

1. At least one principal investigator on the team is from the country of focus in a meaningful and robust capacity. Additionally, WEE-Connect prefers gender diversity on research teams.
2. WEE-Connect's Spring 2025 RFP will prioritize studies that explore health, including (but not limited to) research that explores the role of mobile phones in facilitating women's access to health-related information, and evaluations of digital health interventions. Please review the Initiative white paper for specific health-related learning questions.
3. Depending on the nature of the study, WEE-Connect will prioritize quantitative proposals that explore the cost-effectiveness of interventions, information that is critical to scaling interventions that work.

Contractual Requirements

Please note that due to the requirements of a few Initiative-level outputs, some aspects of WEE-Connect timelines are not flexible. Please review the following contractual stipulations prior to submitting your proposal to ensure that your team can comply with the terms of our WEE-Connect awards.

1. Field work for all funded projects will be contractually required to launch within six months of the contract signature. Teams that are not able to launch planned fieldwork within this window risk cancellation of their award.
2. BIGD will require a signed contract with any partner implementing an intervention (as relevant) as an early deliverable. Please have clear, transparent, and detailed conversations with any implementing partner early - particularly about the implications of any randomization - to ensure that all parties are on the same page.
3. The generation and dissemination of early research learnings is critical for WEE-Connect-supported projects. Final reports, draft working papers, and policy briefs will be required on a condensed timeline. Proposal teams should structure their work plans and budgets to account for the preparation of early research learnings.
4. Subawardees who are more than two months late submitting any deliverable will no longer be eligible to apply for BIGD funding.
5. Projects must conclude by July 31, 2027, at the latest.

Technical Proposal Guidelines

To submit a Technical Proposal, applicants should submit a narrative, **not to exceed twelve pages**, which must include, but is not limited to, all of the items outlined below in the following template.

1. Project Title

2. Project Summary

- a. **Description of the project:** A short description of the project, not to exceed 500 words. This is similar to an abstract of the proposal and should include, among other things, the research questions, intervention, and study design.
- b. **Country focus**
- c. **Start and end date:** Projects including data collection and reporting should be completed by July 31, 2027.
- d. **Total budget requested:** Please indicate if you have obtained funding from a different source(s). It is mandatory to include the marginal contribution the WEE-Connect grant will make towards the study. Please only include funds committed.

3. Section One: Applicant Information

- a. **Researchers (for each PI, starting with the lead-PI. Please indicate the corresponding PI if the lead-PI is not the corresponding PI)**
 - i. Name
 - ii. Designation
 - iii. Institutional affiliation
 - iv. Does the research team include a PI from the study's country of focus?² Please describe how this individual will be guaranteed an equitable, meaningful, and robust leadership role on the research team.
- b. **Management body**
 - i. Partner organizations

² As per WEE-Connect's working definition, a PI will be considered "from" the country of research if he or she meets the following parameters:

- Completed high school or an advanced degree in the country; and
- Is presently affiliated with an institution in the country
- Other - if a PI considers him/herself to be from the country of study, but has a unique situation that does not meet our criteria, he or she is welcome to provide an explanation.

- ii. Partner organization capacity (experience in similar research, field implementation capacity, human resource)

4. Section 2: The Research

a. Research context

- i. Research theme

b. Research problem statement

- i. Please clearly and directly state the research question that motivates the research, **not to exceed 100 words**.

c. Relevance to WEE-Connect objective

- i. Proposals must explain the project's scientific contribution to advancing knowledge on women's digital connectivity.
- ii. If applying to add an additional treatment arm, applicants should describe why it makes sense to add this to the study.
- iii. References to any key relevant literature which supports the study's hypotheses or demonstrates the need for WEE-Connect-related work in this area are encouraged.

d. Academic innovation and contribution to literature

- i. Identify what knowledge gap you are addressing and how it will advance the field.
- ii. Provide information about any ongoing or completed data collection(s) in the existing study, including the timeline and outcomes measured.
- iii. Directly map the potential contribution to WEE-Connect's thematic framework laid out in the WEE-Connect white paper.
- iv. Explain how this project will push the frontier of existing knowledge to find a meaningful solution to the problem you are addressing.

e. Stakeholder engagement and community impact

- i. Who will work with you, and how will you work together?
- ii. Applicants should identify government, civil society, and/or commercial partners, and implementing partners (those involved in the evaluation itself). This may be the same or separate sets of organizations.

- iii. Is there an indication that partners or involved stakeholders would be interested in interim outputs or final results? How will this range of stakeholders become aware of the results and benefit from the data and interim outputs (e.g., baseline descriptive statistics) generated from this evaluation? Outline a specific plan for how you will share interim outputs and final results.
- iv. WEE-Connect encourages capacity-building both among partners in the intervention and/or research implementing partners. Please mention any specific components of the project that will build the capacity of partners.
- v. How can stakeholders benefit from the evidence?
- vi. Please explain the potential of the intervention to be scaled up, if any (by governments, firms, non-government organizations, etc.)

5. Section 3: Research design

a. Intervention and theory of change

- i. Please clearly and directly state and describe, in detail, the intervention that you plan to test. Please directly address any potential ethical concerns that may arise with the intervention.
- ii. For qualitative proposals, explain how your project will strengthen an existing study or contribute to the broader WEE-Connect research agenda.
- iii. Please clearly and directly describe the hypothesis that underpins your proposed intervention/solution.
- iv. ***If appropriate***, does your study have descriptive data or existing results to motivate this request for funding? If so, please summarize.
- v. ***If appropriate***, are you able to collect cost data for the intervention, and to generate a cost-effectiveness or cost-benefit analysis as part of your evaluation? If so, how and at what stage of the evaluation will you obtain this data? How will this cost data be used (e.g., efficiency, cost-benefit analysis)?

b. Methodology (Evaluation Design and Data Collection):

- i. ***Please clearly and directly describe the study design that includes the following key information:***
 - 1. Please describe the unit of analysis and, if appropriate, the unit of randomization (e.g., individual, household, village, etc.)

2. ***If appropriate***, please describe the study arms. We strongly encourage teams to address any potential ethical concerns that may arise with designing the study arms.
3. What is the method of randomization (e.g., lottery, phase-in, encouragement, etc.)? Please skip if not appropriate for the qualitative design.
4. What are the intermediate and final outcome indicators? How will these be measured? When will you take measurements and how frequently?
5. **For qualitative studies**, please state clearly the plan for sampling, data collection, and analysis. This should include a description of the methods used for data collection, processing, and management. If appropriate, state any predetermined codes that will be utilized or describe the grounded approach to analysis that will be utilized. What theories and/or existing research have informed your analysis plan? How will you synthesize your findings? What is your plan for the publication of results?
6. **For secondary data analysis**, please describe the dataset(s) you plan to use, plans for obtaining the dataset(s), and plans for data analysis.
7. What are the foreseeable threats to the internal validity of this study? (e.g., compliance, attrition, spillovers, etc.)?
8. Is this part of a larger or ongoing evaluation? If it is, please mention what the WEE-Connect funds will be used for.

ii. **Power calculations, sample selection, and sample size**

1. Please clearly describe your sample selection process, sample size, etc. For qualitative projects, explain how you know this is appropriate (e.g., saturation). We strongly encourage teams to address any potential ethical concerns that may come up with the sample selection procedure.
2. For quantitative studies, please describe your power calculations (effect size, take up/compliance, variance, clusters, observations per cluster, intracluster correlation). We strongly encourage applicants to be detailed in the presentation of power calculations.
 - a. What is the minimum detectable effect size? Why do you believe this is an appropriate size?

b. What data and assumptions did you use for these estimates?

iii. **Mitigating risks**

1. What risks, if any, are anticipated during the course of the research, and what steps will be taken to mitigate them?

iv. **Target population**

1. What population does the intervention attempt to impact?

2. Does this approach target a specific region, demographic group, or people involved in a specific sector?

3. Do other populations face the same conditions as your target group, and could they potentially benefit from the innovation(s) evaluated here?

4. How, if at all, will the intervention—or broader implications of the research—improve the lives of marginalized persons (low-income, women, and socially excluded groups)?

v. **Expected outcomes**

1. Intermediate

2. Final

vi. **Timeline of deliverables**

Please include a timeline for the project and the outputs you expect to produce.

6. Section 4: Financial Description

Budget Narrative: Applicants should submit a budget narrative, **not to exceed one page**, detailing the major costs within the budget. For example, travel costs should include a breakdown of how many trips are planned, the estimated cost per trip, etc. If field costs are detailed in the budget template (number of field staff, roles, rates, etc.), they do not need further explanation in the budget narrative.

Budget Documentation

Applicants should submit a project budget breakdown using the template provided and informed by the corresponding budget guidelines [here](#).

In addition, applicants should submit a separate budget narrative, **not to exceed one page**, justifying the major costs within the budget. For example, please explain the particular staffing structure proposed and include a justification of the number of international trips planned. If field costs are detailed in the budget template (number of field staff, roles, rates, etc.), they do not need further explanation in the budget narrative.

Proposal Review Process

The proposal review process has been designed to ensure that all funded studies are methodologically sound and advance the WEE-Connect learning agenda. Proposals are shortlisted for funding following a three-stage review process.

First, WEE-Connect staff verify proposals for completeness and eligibility and perform an initial quality assessment. Eligible proposals then undergo a peer-review evaluation by the BIGD research network. Following the peer-review evaluation, proposals are ranked and shortlisted for decision-making by an Advisory Board. The Advisory Board, composed of a group of academic experts as well as the BIGD leadership team, will convene to decide on the final selection of proposals. The Advisory Board will meet to select proposals in June 2025. The Advisory Board may impose additional conditions and request further information and/or amendments to the proposal whenever needed.

BIGD strictly adheres to rules of impartiality during its evaluation process and provisions are in place to ensure that decision-making happens fairly and transparently.

Awards

Applicants will be informed of the outcome of their application shortly after the Advisory Board meetings. Successful applicants will be contacted with the details of the funding and contractual agreements. Please note that all correspondence will be directed to the individual listed as the corresponding investigator.

Grant Deliverables

Please note that deliverables will vary on the basis of the project type and duration. The following schedule details major deliverables only and is subject to change on a case-by-case basis.

Output	Description
Acceptance of Contract	Fully executed contract is delivered to both parties
Signed Contract with	Any project that is collaborating with a partner implementing an intervention must include a signed contract with the partner, clearly

Implementing Partner	stipulating the terms and timeline of the intervention as an early deliverable.
IRB Approval	For any research involving human participants and/or data relating to identifiable human subjects, researchers are required to complete a research ethics review and provide proof of the approval and/or exemption from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) that conducted the review. In cases where countries also have a national research ethics body, such approval must also be obtained and submitted to the Initiative.
Progress Report	Twice annual progress reports and financial updates of the project
Administrative Data Delivered	Raw and de-identified data submitted along with executable code
Final Financial Report & Final Report	<p>A final financial report</p> <p>The Final Report will be aimed at presenting your research project in detail, with a high degree of clarity and credibility, to policy and academic audiences and providing an account of the extent and ways the project achieved impact.</p> <p>In order to make all research findings accessible, all research works derived from WEE-Connect funding must be made available freely to the public.</p> <p>The Initiative should be mentioned as the funding source in any public-facing documents or materials derived from the project.</p>
Draft Working Paper and Study Instruments	A draft of the working paper with the potential for publication and all study instruments used for the study
Cost Effectiveness Analysis	As appropriate, evaluations will produce a cost-effectiveness analysis as a means to illustrate the costs associated with generating a given programmatic impact.
Policy Brief	A policy brief detailing the findings in the draft working paper
Blog Post	Annual blog posts to be shared on WEE-Connect’s website

Submission Instructions

Applicants must submit completed versions of all of the following documents by **March 11th, 2025 at 11:59 pm Bangladesh Standard Time** (5:59 pm GMT / 1:59pm EST) [here](#). All applications, along with all necessary documents, must be submitted as PDF files in the following order, except the budget, which must be submitted as an Excel file. No information and/or documents from applicants will be accepted or considered after the closing date and time.

1. **Proposal Document:** The following items should be saved as a single PDF file in the given order.
 - a. **Proposal Cover Sheet:** This reference document must be completed in its entirety in the submission form.
 - b. **Technical Proposal:** This document:
 - i. Must address all of the items discussed in the RFP;
 - ii. Should be no more than twelve pages, written in Calibri font, size 11, and may be single-spaced;
 - c. **Up to five-page CVs:** For all Principal Investigators
 - d. **Letter of Support:** Please obtain letter(s) of support from the following:
 - i. Letters from each partner implementing the intervention (as relevant), indicating the details of their commitment to the research. These letters should demonstrate that the implementing partner has a clear understanding of the implications of this collaboration, especially with regard to any randomization of the intervention.
 - ii. A letter/document stating the host institution's approval of the proposal materials.
 - iii. Graduate students applying are required to include a letter of support from a research advisor eligible for this call. The letter should indicate the advisor's willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.
2. **Budget Narrative:** Justifying the major costs within the budget, **not to exceed one page**, written in Calibri font, Size 11, and may be single-spaced.
3. **Budget:** The Excel template provided must be completed in its entirety and saved as a single Excel File.