



Digital & Physical Infrastructure

Lack of inclusive instant payment systems

Barrier Definition

Instant Payment Systems (IPS) are digital payment infrastructures and scheme rules that enable near real-time transfers of funds across providers, available at any time, around the clock. *Inclusive* IPS (IIPS) are interoperable systems that support diverse channels, use cases, and participants - including banks and non-banks - so that people without traditional bank accounts, as well as low-income, rural, and informally employed populations, can access and use them. **Well-designed IIPS embed affordability, trust, and safety into the architecture itself, creating the conditions for women not only to transact, but also to reliably receive wages, government-to-person (G2P) transfers, and remittances.**

Why is this barrier important?

Instant payment systems (IIPS) have strong potential to advance women's financial inclusion by enabling faster, more reliable digital transactions. However, without intentional design, these systems tend to benefit users who are already included.

At the same time, the speed and finality of instant payments increase exposure to fraud and reduce opportunities for recourse. Without strong consumer protection and dispute resolution mechanisms, these risks can undermine trust - particularly for women - and limit adoption.

Connected Barriers



Policy & Regulation

Lack of gender-intentional NFIS
Broader legal constraints



Institutional Norms & Practices

Low digital capability within financial institutions



Digital & Physical Infrastructure

Distance from financial service points
Lack of diversity in distribution channels
Poor digital & foundational ID infrastructure



Product & Market Design

Low scalability of products
Poor understanding of women's financial needs



Entry & Capability Barriers

High cost of using DFS (incl. transaction cost)
Real or perceived lack of money
Lack of phone & SIM ownership

Most Relevant Segments

1

Excluded, marginalized

2

Excluded, high potential

3

Included, underserved

4

Included Not underserved

Customer Journey Relevance



Phase 1:
Account Ownership

Phase 2:
Basic Account Usage

Phase 3:
Active Account Usage

Phase 4:
Economic Empowerment



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

IIPS hold significant potential to accelerate women's financial inclusion. As financial ecosystems increasingly rely on digital payments rails to deliver wages, G2P, remittances, and merchant payments, IIPS can enable women to receive funds reliably, transact more easily, and participate more fully in the digital economy. Markets such as Brazil and India demonstrate how rapidly instant payments can scale: Brazil's Pix processed [over 42 billion transactions in 2023](#) and is now used by over 70% of adults, including [74.5% of women and 78.4% of men](#), indicating near gender parity in adoption.

Realizing this potential, however, requires intentional system design. When IIPS are not designed with women's needs in mind, the infrastructure tends to benefit those who are already included. Women may remain underserved, limiting their ability to transact digitally and build the financial histories that support broader economic participation. While the global gender gap in account ownership has narrowed to [6 percentage points](#), the gender gap in digital payments usage has remained virtually unchanged since 2014. As a result, women risk becoming "digitized recipients"—receiving wages or transfers through digital rails without being empowered to actively transact, save, or build financial histories

Designing IIPS without a gender lens also represents a missed opportunity for payment system operators and digital financial service providers (DFSPs). Women represent a large and growing user base whose participation can [significantly expand payment volumes](#). Higher volumes can create a virtuous cycle—lowering costs, attracting more providers, and enabling new services that benefit the entire ecosystem. Practical guidance for integrating gender into IIPS design is available through the Women's Inclusion Toolkit, which offers a framework for system operators and policymakers to embed inclusion from the outset

At the same time, the defining feature of instant payments—speed—also heightens risk. Real-time execution and payment finality reduce the window for reversing transactions or correcting errors. Without strong consumer protection, fraud prevention, and dispute resolution mechanisms, users may face greater exposure to scams and losses. For women—who often report lower trust in digital financial services and greater sensitivity to financial shocks—these risks can quickly undermine confidence and slow adoption.

Ensuring that safety and recourse are integral to IIPS design is therefore critical to sustaining women's participation in digital payments.

Governance is a key upstream lever for gender-intentional IIPS.

Governance determines how instant payment systems are designed, who can participate, and what the system optimizes for—whether speed, safety, affordability, or inclusion. These decisions shape participation rules, pricing structures, and user protections, with direct implications for women's access and experience. Gender-intentional IIPS therefore require more than layering women-focused products onto existing rails; they depend on governance mechanisms that explicitly incorporate inclusion into system design and decision-making.

- The World Bank's Fast Payments Governance Guidance recommends governance structures that incorporate the interests of all stakeholders, including end users—not just formal participants. It emphasizes that end users should be treated as the "ultimate service beneficiaries," highlighting the need for governance frameworks that correct for exclusionary system optimization. ([World Bank, 2025](#))



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

- The L1P Women’s Inclusion Toolkit, designed specifically for IIPS, provides practical guidance on integrating gender across governance, scheme design, identity and onboarding, and consumer protection. It emphasizes inclusive ownership structures and feedback mechanisms that embed women’s voices in system design and decision-making, and offers concrete approaches for payment system operators to design for inclusion from the start. ([Level One Project, 2025](#))
- Where governance and consultation mechanisms exclude gender expertise, system design may fail to account for risks that disproportionately affect women, including fraud exposure, privacy concerns, and safety in digital interactions.
- Country experience demonstrates how governance choices shape outcomes. In Brazil, the Banco Central do Brasil convened extensive stakeholder engagement through the Pix Forum (including ~200 organizations), mandated participation by large banks to ensure system reach, and prohibited end-user fees for consumers. These governance decisions reduced key barriers—fragmented access and pricing—and contributed to rapid, mass-market adoption. ([World Bank, 2025](#))
- IPS adoption is higher in systems that allow non-bank participation and support a wider range of use cases, expanding provider diversity and competition. Women are more likely to rely on local, smaller, and non-bank providers; restrictive participation requirements or high scheme fees can therefore create a coverage gap, even where rails exist. ([BIS, 2024](#); [Level One Project, 2025](#))
- Interoperability and low, transparent fees reduce switching costs, increase competition, and lower transaction costs—key constraints for cost-sensitive users. Where interoperability is limited, women report moving money between networks by withdrawing and redepositing cash—incurring additional time and cost burdens compared to interoperable systems. ([Caribou, Caribou Digital, and DFS Labs](#))
- Affordability is a binding constraint for women, with low-income women facing higher relative cost barriers and having less discretionary income than men. [Evidence from Kenya](#) shows women may pay more in certain P2P fees per transaction, suggesting pricing structures can be regressive by gender. Ultra-low scheme fees can reduce pressure on providers to pass costs on to end users. ([Caribou, Caribou Digital, and DFS Labs](#))

Scheme design choices shape whether women can access and benefit from IIPS

IPS design choices—such as participation rules, pricing structures, interoperability, use-case prioritization, and identifier design—determine who can access the system, how affordable it is, and whether it is relevant and safe for everyday use. While often treated as technical and gender-neutral, these decisions shape provider participation, transaction costs, and user experience in ways that can either expand or constrain women’s adoption and use. Without intentional design, IPS may achieve reach without inclusion—leaving women with limited provider choice, higher relative costs, fewer relevant use cases, and greater exposure to privacy and safety risks.



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

Use-case design determines whether systems become relevant for women

- The BIS framework identifies broad use-case support (P2P, merchant payments, bill pay, G2P) as a key driver of adoption. However, G2P and wage payments alone are insufficient to sustain usage—continued engagement depends on availability of relevant, everyday use cases. ([BIS, 2024](#))
- Evidence from Côte d'Ivoire shows that dominant use cases (e.g., bill pay) may align more with male financial roles, leaving women's financial needs less well served. In practice, this can lead to "receive-and-cash-out" behavior, where women receive digital funds but do not transact digitally due to limited relevant use cases. ([Caribou, Caribou Digital, and DFS Labs](#))
- Sustained usage requires designing for women's transaction patterns, including: small-value, high-frequency payments; informal and microenterprise transactions; privacy-sensitive receiving; assisted or agent-based experiences

Identifier, privacy, and error-reduction design affect women's safety and trust

- Common identifier choices (e.g., phone numbers) can create **gender-specific risks**, including exposure to harassment or social sanction through unsolicited contact. Allowing alternative identifiers can mitigate these risks. ([Caribou, Caribou Digital, and DFS Labs](#))
- Women often adopt privacy-protective behaviors (e.g., limiting use of full names in business contexts), indicating that payment system design must account for both safety and usability. ([Level One Project, 2025](#))
- Features such as aliasing and confirmation-of-payee should be designed to be both fraud-aware and privacy-aware, ensuring that safety does not come at the cost of user exposure. ([Level One Project, 2025](#))

Identity, onboarding, and device/channel realities determine who can transact—and who can transact safely

Access to IPS depends not only on system design, but also on how users are identified, onboarded, and able to interact with the system. Fragmented identity systems, rigid KYC requirements, and reliance on smartphone-based channels can create barriers to entry and safe usage. These constraints disproportionately affect women who are more likely than men to lack formal identification, use lower-end devices, and rely on assisted channels. Integrating identity systems with payment rails and designing for low-tech, low-data environments are therefore critical to inclusive participation.

- Digital identity, instant payments, and data exchange systems often evolve in parallel rather than in an integrated way, creating onboarding friction. Greater interoperability between identity and payment systems can reduce repeated verification requirements, streamline onboarding, and reduce fraud and misdirected payments. For women, this improves both access (account opening) and trust (safer ongoing use). ([World Bank, 2026](#))
- Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the lowest ID ownership rates globally. Gender gaps in ID ownership are concentrated in West and East Africa (averaging five percentage points) and most pronounced in the economies with the lowest overall rates. In Niger, for example, only 43 percent of women have ID compared with 63 percent of men. Across the region, 15 percent of adults without an account cite lack of documentation as a barrier to opening one. Women are 5 percentage points more likely than men to not have an ID—blocking account opening and even SIM acquisition where ID is required. ([World Bank, 2025](#))



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

- Women are more likely to use lower-end devices, have limited access to smartphones and mobile internet, and rely on agent-mediated or assisted services. IPS that assume smartphone access risk excluding women at scale. Inclusive systems must function across: basic phones (e.g., USSD), low-data environments, and agent-assisted channels.

Safety, consumer protection, and recourse are essential to women's sustained use of IIPS.

The speed and irrevocability of instant payments reduce the time available to detect and correct errors, increasing exposure to fraud and loss. In this environment, safety, error prevention, and dispute resolution are core system features, not add-ons. Because women are more likely to disengage after negative financial experiences, weak consumer protection and recourse mechanisms can disproportionately undermine their sustained use of digital payments.

- Instant payments increase fraud and error risk due to real-time execution and settlement finality. Because women are more likely to lose trust after fraud or failed transactions and disengage when complaint processes are inadequate, weak recourse mechanisms can disproportionately reduce women's continued usage, even where adoption occurs. ([Level One Project, 2025](#))
- Overlay services such as confirmation of payee and request-to-pay can reduce fraud and payment errors and improve user confidence. Combined with clear liability frameworks, effective complaint channels, and user-centered design (e.g., confirmation prompts), these features help create a safer payment environment and support sustained usage.

Inclusion strengthens system sustainability

Women's inclusion is not only a social objective—it is a core driver of scale and sustainability in instant payment systems. System design choices that enable women to actively use digital payments expand the overall user base and increase transaction volumes, which are critical to achieving network effects. These network effects lower costs, attract more providers, and support continued investment in new services. Conversely, when women are excluded or under-served, systems generate fewer transactions, limiting their ability to reach scale and weakening the business case for ecosystem expansion. Designing instant payment systems that meet women's needs is therefore essential not only for inclusion, but for long-term system viability.

- L1P research identifies a "scale imperative," highlighting women's participation as a key driver of transaction volumes in digital payment ecosystems. Higher transaction volumes strengthen network effects, which reduce per-transaction costs, improve system affordability, attract a broader range of providers, and enable continued investment in new products and services. ([Level One Project, 2025](#))