India has made tremendous strides in expanding access to financial services, thanks in large part to its robust digital infrastructure. The proportion of adults with a formal account more than doubled between 2011 and 2017, from 35 to 80 percent. The country has also successfully narrowed the gender gap in account ownership to 6 percentage points, slightly below the global average. The government has played a key role in these successes by creating an enabling environment for financial technology, including a national digital ID system.

Way Forward

To celebrate this progress, discuss ways to increase usage and close the remaining gender gap, the UNSGSA visited India in May 2018. She met with leaders from the public, private, and development sectors, and of course with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and convened the first-ever country-level meeting of the CEO Partnership for Financial Inclusion. In her meetings, she emphasized three key priorities:

Leverage India’s experience to inform other countries’ efforts

Noting that India has set up an exemplary digital finance infrastructure as a public good and developed policies to make the best use of this infrastructure, Queen Máxima remarked that other countries could learn much from its experience. With Prime Minister Modi and others, she supported the idea of establishing a global center for knowledge exchange on technology-enabled financial inclusion.

Enhance usage of financial services among underserved populations

While account ownership has increased dramatically, many accounts remain inactive. The UNSGSA emphasized
the need for customer-centric solutions that meet the needs of low-income and rural individuals, as well as more access points. She cited the need for “offline-online” integration, noting that financial service providers must have a physical presence as well as a digital one. She applauded the scale that the government has reached in digitizing its payments, including social safety-net payments, which have helped drive take-up and usage.

Close the gender gap

The Special Advocate also made several recommendations for increasing women's awareness of, access to, and usage of financial services, including:

- A national initiative focused on breaking down barriers to mobile and internet use by rural women, mainly focused on increasing awareness and ability to use;
- A greater number of female banking agents; and
- Increased collection of gender-disaggregated data by service providers.

Next Steps

Along with her partners—the Better Than Cash Alliance, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CGAP, the Omidyar Network, and the World Bank—the UNSGSA will continue to support India. This will include supporting India's leadership in the global exchange of digital financial inclusion experience, identifying solutions to enhance banking agent practices, and exploring ways to further extend digital financial inclusion to women.