



## Civil 20 Gender Working Group Communiqué on Digitalization

### *Digitalization as a level playing field*

While digitalization offers many opportunities, it can also perpetuate inequalities, namely the digital gender divide, gaps between different demographics of a given country and gaps between industrialized and so-called developing countries.

The covid-19 pandemic has accelerated and almost forced the paradigm shift towards a digital society and economy, leaving many behind in the process. Women and girls are bearing the brunt of this sudden adjustment, but even before the pandemic, the digital gender divide was one of the many obstacles hampering the full realization of their rights and potential: according to OECD, in 2018 some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and access to the internet<sup>1</sup>.

Bridging this gap is therefore more important than ever, as it can allow women and girls to access job opportunities, education tools, information and a wide range of services including healthcare. In fact, the digital transformation can be employed as a **tool to promote gender equality and women's empowerment**, if used as a way to enable a level playing field: information and communications technologies (ICT) can facilitate the participation of women in society and in decision making processes, the access to training opportunities, job opportunities and services, the networking and organization of women from different parts of the world to act against sexism, misogyny and rape culture, as well as the promotion of awareness campaigns against gender-based violence and cyber harassment. In order to do so, governments must ensure that women and girls in all their diversity possess digital skills and have access to internet and technological devices.

New research by Amnesty International<sup>2</sup> revealed the alarming impact that abuse and harassment on social media are having on women, with women around the world reporting stress, anxiety, or panic attacks as a result of these harmful online experiences. Moreover, girls face the threat of grooming.<sup>3</sup> Social media platforms, especially for women and marginalized groups, are a critical space for individuals to exercise the right to freedom of expression, but at the same time online violence, abuse and exploitation are a direct threat to this freedom of expression. This is why curtailing the spread of violence, abuse and exploitation in digital platforms and networks through regulatory bodies and task forces, as well as reinforcing the bridging of the digital gender divide, are important asks that appear to be more pressing than ever in our current times, where access to digital technologies is crucial and the future of our economies, as well as many other aspects of human life, rely heavily on the digital world. As digitalization will shape our future to a great extent, promoting digital empowerment of girls has to start in schools as stereotypes about technology and STEM not being suitable for girls are still rampant.

### *A people-centered, gender transformative approach to digitalization*

Covid-19 took a snapshot of society in all its structural problems: systemic inequalities within and among countries in the distribution of wealth, in the access to health, technology, livelihoods and a clean environment, the incidence of systemic violence, particularly against women and girls, and the issue of debt sustainability, which is now more critical than ever for debtor countries due to the pandemic-related economic crisis. This is why we advocate for a people-centered, human rights and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-6/>

<sup>3</sup> The term Grooming is used to describe the action of preparing a child for a meeting perpetrated by pedophiles, especially via an internet chat room, with the intention of committing a sexual offence.



gender transformative approach that will bring forth the importance of common goods such as water, health, and a clean and safe environment. In light of its considerable implications in various sectors, **digitalization should be counted as a common good**. Digitalization can be a powerful tool for the assertion of human rights, for denouncing human rights violations, just think of the numerous initiatives carried out via the Internet by human rights defenders in connection with global networks. Therefore, in regulating this challenging process the United Nations and national governments must make an effort to actively listen to all stakeholders, especially those who are the true bearers of common interests: women and girls in all their diversity, civil society organizations, indigenous and racialized persons, LGBTQI+ individuals, human rights defenders and all those who are fighting against violence, discrimination, the exploitation of labor and natural resources. In this panorama, digitalization must be accessible to everyone and accompanied by a political commitment to counter gender stereotypes that prevent women and girls from benefiting from ITC, including employment in the ITC sector. In fact, the participation of women and girls, as well as other marginalized communities, can work towards the elimination of the gender and racial bias found in algorithms and IT tools. Additionally, women and girls would benefit from the introduction of **online safe havens** for women and girls through digital presences such as government and educational platforms that include smart digital education, warning sign systems, and platforms to report bad actors. It is of utmost importance to see girls and women not only as end-users of digitalization for profit: digitalization can become a powerful agency tool for girls and women, but they have to be involved in the process from the design phase of the IT medium. Only then will it be possible to consider, for example, algorithms useful to recognize misogynistic or sexist content in order to create safer networks. Therefore, it is important to place digital security firmly at the center of our engagement within the process of digitization, for example by holding social media companies accountable for ensuring that moderators are trained in identifying gender and other identity-related threats and abuse on their platforms.

Civil society has an important role in advocating the bridging of gender divide gaps, the contrast of gender stereotypes, putting women and girls at the center of the digitization policies and holding governments accountable so that they ensure an equitable digital future is possible for all and the needs of women and girls are adequately met.

### ***The role of institutions and other stakeholders***

In order to manage digitalization processes that will become increasingly complex and multifaceted due to their financial, political and economic implications, governments should promote **multi-stakeholder partnerships, global partnership of “like-minded” public, private and third sector actors**. The contribution of the third sector is indeed fundamental, as civil society organizations (especially feminist and women's associations) can contribute, through their human rights and gender transformative approach, with bottom-up operational strategies tested on the ground, therefore having the ability to adapt projects and test their potential on a small scale. Often, associations are at the forefront of proposals that politicians should then receive and transform into policies.

In order to combat online violence, it is crucial to involve feminist organization as they link the anti-violence sector with the technology and social innovation sector; moreover, feminist responses to the risks and threats of digitalization are multiple, and at the core of feminist responses are intersectional approaches of building skills, confidence, and networks of solidarity to effectively engage with and transform digital technologies.

Governments must ensure that adequate laws, policies, practices and trainings are in place to prevent and end online violence, abuse and exploitation against women and girls. To promote



women's empowerment and gender equality, governments have to consider two levels: 1) putting in place mechanisms to prevent the exclusion of women from digitalized service delivery and democratic participation systems; 2) designing initiatives that specially address women's special needs and priorities, such as confidential provision of sexual and reproductive health and rights-related information over an online platform, crisis helpline for women encountering VAW, etc.

While digitalization can be an important tool to achieve the abovementioned goals, we also firmly believe in the importance of pairing these efforts with offline commitments to tackle gender inequality in all its aspects and ensure an inclusive, gender transformative and people-centered recovery from the pandemic crisis.

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