

WHERE ARE WE IN GENDER EQUALITY?

Women have major barriers to reaching the top in ICT careers, and in just accessing technology in some countries – and all women face both offline and online violence, says **ADRIANA LABARDINI INZUNZA**

Imagine being at the IIC’s annual conference in the year 2028 with an equal number of women and men experts in the fields of ultrabroadband infrastructure, all-shared spectrum, data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms, robotics, automated vehicles, torts law for autonomous devices, cyber jurisdiction, virtual labour communities, meta platforms, collaborative media, internet governance and cryptocurrencies.

The IIC president took us through the technological and institutional evolution of society, citizens and ICT in the data economy since 2018. “The past 10 years have seen unprecedented transformation and yet, we are still witnessing violence and discrimination against women – but now coming mainly from autonomous machines that have been fed with centuries of gender bias, stereotypes and discrimination from a long prevailing sexist society,” she highlighted.

It is with that warning in mind that I highlight the topic of gender equality as a prerequisite to eliminate various forms of violence against women, the key to bridging the digital gender divide, and a proven way to increase profitability, productivity and innovation in any public and private sector organisation. Physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence and discrimination against women both offline and online are still common, but well-designed global and local policies and campaigns to fight it at home, school, work and in the media will contribute greatly to achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 – which of course is gender equality. We have 12 years left.

The president added that with AI, equality has been a steeper cliff to climb. We must catalyse efforts to stop gender-based discrimination and violence in algorithms, data feeds, wearables, platforms and their online services, applications and content to give the younger generations the same progress we have achieved offline.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER EQUALITY

Let’s first try to understand gender inequality. Take violence: the 2011 Istanbul Convention states that gender-based violence is the result of a historic imbalance in power relations between women and men together with social and cultural structures that have kept women subordinated in public and private spheres. Other key factors impact inequality. According to a study by McKinsey, 15 indicators

grouped in four categories determine how equal a society is for women – work, essential services and enablers, legal protection and political voice, security and autonomy.¹

In the more developed nations, we are finally witnessing an improvement in gender equality with a reduction in physical violence against women and a major impact on the wellbeing of societies as a whole: more effective governments, more productive economies, more profitable industries, healthier citizens, happier children, and less crime. Importantly, we now envisage a freer, fairer, brighter life for men and women who share power, duties, rights, access to public speech, decision-making spaces, as well as domestic and family responsibilities in a more balanced fashion.

McKinsey, in another report, has found that a staggering \$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 by advancing women’s equality in the workplace.² That might be too much given the likelihood of job losses to automated processes and gender-biased AI decisions influencing management

and top executives, but it will still be a huge gain.

The journey will be long though. In 2017, only 7% of government leaders and 15% of corporate board seats were occupied by women.³ Only 3% of CEOs around

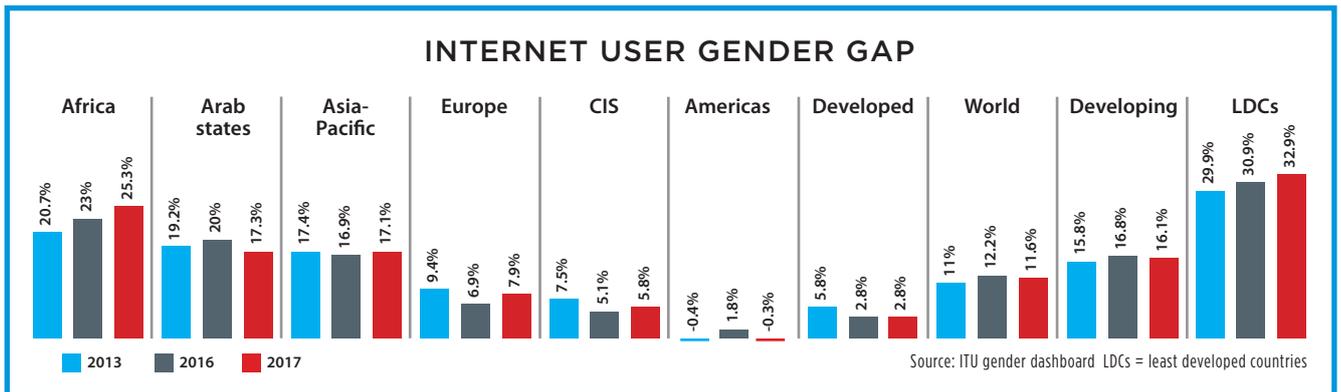


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the world were women and only 21 out of the Fortune 500 companies were led by women (down from 24 in 2014) although in most wealthy countries, there are now more highly educated women than men. Taking a key part of our sector: female participation in the telecoms workforce varies widely among firms, ranging from 10% to 52%, but among the companies surveyed by the GSMA/A.T. Kearney in 2015, in 75% of firms, women accounted for less than 40% of the workforce.⁴

Those countries that have improved gender equality and implemented equal pay and career promotion policies for women and men, see parity or close to parity in female participation in decision-making positions in government, the judiciary, corporations, academia and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). This has made a big difference in profitability, innovation, productivity, corporate image, democracy and liberty.



Aiming for parity requires recruitment and promotion procedures where the gender of the applicant is not revealed, flexible work schedules and locations, longer and more frequent leaves of absence for men, genuine part time jobs, and results-oriented work assessment. The commitment to take on the gender equality agenda is critical.

Transparency and regulation have also been critical to reaching this point, making disclosure of gender statistics mandatory for the payroll; for the share of men and women at every step of the organisational ladder – in promotions and recruitment, and for those who sit on boards and executive committees. Standardised data criteria have made the task easier for larger firms.

OECD countries have increasingly focused efforts to identify female talent and provide encouragement and scholarships for young female students to pursue STEM careers (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). It has been essential to re-educate parents, grandparents, teachers, children and the media so that they “unlearn” stereotypes and help women and men to overcome fears and other barriers in both public and private life, sharing responsibilities of family upbringing and care. By 2028 we will also promote more young women into economics, arts and behavioural sciences, putting “EA” into STEM – we call them STEEAM careers.

As of 2017, figures from the OECD show that the number of women graduates in ICT was alarmingly low. Several barriers are in play, one being that women do not see many females reaching the top in STEM. And the presence of more women in STEM careers does not secure gender equality in the workplace. As women advance professionally, we often start to see a narrower pipeline toward the top despite women’s knowledge and ambition to reach the summit being as strong as that of male peers. But it is likely that high-skills jobs such as data and computer science will be paid equally in the next 10 years simply because of the scarcity of professionals – the technology giants are already paying big salaries to people with talent in fields such as AI.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

When girls and women are kept from learning to use ICTs whether due to poverty, illiteracy, isolation, traditions, or social norms, this exacerbates inequality. We must keep an eye on digital inclusion. In fact, in some regions the gender digital

divide has worsened. As recent figures from the ITU show (see graph), the internet user gender gap has actually widened in Africa and barely changed in the Asia and Pacific region. Among the figures are that there are 184 million fewer women online than men in low- and middle-income countries, and globally 250 million fewer women than men online. Of course, there is the wider issue of the vast number of people with no internet access – although there are 4 billion people now online, the world’s population is now about 7.6 billion. In Latin America there are as many women online as men, so the gender gap has been bridged in my region.

While gender equality in developed countries has no doubt contributed to a virtual disappearance in the gender digital divide in Europe and the US, cultural barriers to the participation of women in the workforce and in using technologies such as smartphones persist in the less developed world. Such gender barriers have been highlighted for some time at the annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF), but the last meeting featured gender for the first time as a main session, rather than just in workshops, which was seen as a breakthrough.

Among the key messages from the main session were that the gender digital divide manifests in multiple dimensions, and discrimination on digital grounds is no less than a human rights issue. Efforts to enable women and girls to access infrastructure and digital technologies need to be complemented with promoting digital literacy, encouraging them to take jobs in technology fields, enabling them to create content that is relevant and valuable to their lives and contexts, and empowering them to contribute to internet governance and digital policy processes.

It was underlined that special attention should be given to gender related issues of subgroups (such as rural women, girls, women in refugee camps) and gender minorities, and the issue of online gender-based abuse and violence was highlighted as a challenge to be addressed by all stakeholders.

Two particular aspects have been raised time and again in past IGF meetings. The first is the cultural norms in patriarchal societies, where women are often expected to stay at home and not take up careers that would expose them to ICTs; further, even then they are deprived of access to the internet and smartphones owing to efforts by men to “protect” them from online harm, but with the result that all access can be denied. The second

GENDER POINTS AND PROJECTS

- SDG 5b aims to enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- An annex to the latest G20 Digital Economy Ministerial Declaration, “Bridging the digital gender divide – Delivering impact”, details actions such as raising awareness, gathering sex-disaggregated data, promoting digital skills, targeting women lagging in digital access and supporting women in digital businesses. It also says cyber violence against women and girls should be addressed. The OECD has produced a report informing the G20, also called “Bridging the digital gender divide”.
- There are several global initiatives for women in technology, including EQUALS, launched by the ITU and UN Women in 2016, which aims to develop access, skills and leadership,

- and #eskills4girls, which is tackling the gender digital divide in low income and developing countries.
- Publicising pioneering female internet figures such as China’s internet pioneer, Qiheng Hu, provides role models of women to take up ICT careers, and use them in everyday life. Research from Microsoft has shown that the number of girls interested in STEM across Europe almost doubles when they have a role model to inspire them.
- The term “dataveillance” is used to describe practices that aggregate large quantities of data, including biometrics, to monitor, track and regulate people and populations, and has gender, sexuality, race and disability implications. Campaigners are increasingly concerned about what they term the “informatisation” of the body.
- EROTICS, a project from Progressive

- Communications, is aiming to create better understanding of content and harm based on women’s experience of sexuality online.
- Points made at the last IGF meeting on online gender violence:
 - Online abuse against women is often sexualised and designed to not only push one woman offline but the whole female community
 - A disconnect exists between how offline and online harassment is treated by law enforcement
 - Victims should understand what their rights are on- and offline
 - Women abused online are also more vulnerable to a physical attack
 - Efforts by platforms to make certain materials harder to find may have the reverse effect, as Instagram found with content on self-harming
 - Female politicians face much online abuse. See the #NotTheCost campaign.

is the many initiatives that foster small businesses and entrepreneurship among women where ICTs are key enablers, in addition to ICT training and career opportunities in technology fields. See the panel for more about the issues and projects, not least a new G20 declaration on gender.

COMBATING ONLINE VIOLENCE

I turn now to the worst aspect of gender inequality: violence. According to the European Council, in 2014 12 women were killed every day in Europe; one in every five women has experienced physical or sexual violence at home in Europe.⁵ In Mexico, my country, seven women a day were killed in 2016; in the same year, 1.3 million women were victims of some kind of physical violence.⁶

Indeed, physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence against women and girls has been endemic, despite commitments of the international community such as the Belém Do Pará Convention, to fight all forms of violence against women, and 14 years later, the European Council’s Istanbul Convention ratified by the EU in 2017 and by most EU members (11 EU members pending in 2018).

It has taken a long time to realise that eliminating violence against women requires, among other conditions, equal access to power, but it is still not enough in the digital society. Life online is a hall of mirrors of our lives offline, with the best and the worst of the human race let loose.

Eliminating acts of violence online against women, whether through threats, stalking, harassment or hate speech, is a tough challenge. These threats can severely affect fundamental rights to freedom of speech, psychological and even physical integrity, privacy, honour and reputation. Although bad for male victims too, as of 2017,

women were 27 times more likely to be victims of cyber violence than men, which results in digital exclusion for girls and women, according to the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development.⁷

A paper issued last year by the IGF’s Dynamic Coalition on Gender and Internet Governance, “An internet for #YesAllWomen? Women’s rights, gender and equality in digital spaces”, notes that there are five clusters of feminist principles for the internet: access, movement and public participation, economy, expression and “agency” – and it is this last one that is explored. Key issues in agency are consent, privacy and data, memory and anonymity. Consent is a critical women’s rights issue in the digital age. Women’s agency lies in their ability to make informed decisions on what aspects of their public or private lives to share in digital spaces – as information, data, text, images or video.

Take the posting of intimate images and data without consent, where the perpetrator can remain anonymous. Despite tools to identify the IP address (which is also one of many reasons to promote full migration to IPv6) and the take-down duties of search engines and content platforms, online violence on digital platforms is rising, and we need more effective collaborative efforts to combat it.

And as I noted, my concern is also about the use of AI and that the pace of new technology will outpace these efforts. We would all be better off had these tools been designed from the start by more women, and certainly with a gender perspective.⁸

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