

POSITION PAPER

PLACING GENDER EQUALITY AT  
THE HEART OF THE GLOBAL  
DIGITAL COMPACT

TAKING FORWARD THE RECOMMENDATIONS  
OF THE SIXTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE  
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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# 1. Introduction

Emerging digital technologies hold immense potential to improve people’s lives and accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They are rapidly transforming societies and propelling unprecedented advances in social and economic outcomes for women and girls. Yet digital technologies are simultaneously giving rise to profound new challenges, that may perpetuate and deepen existing patterns of gender inequalities, discrimination, and violence against women and girls. One of the greatest challenges of the world’s digital transformation today is to address the current gender digital divide. This has become the new face of gender inequality, limiting women’s and girls’ opportunities to meaningfully and safely access, use, lead and design technology.

In 2023, the **sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women** provided ambitious recommendations to harness the speed, scale and scope of digital transformation for the empowerment of women and girls in all their diversity, and to urgently address key issues affecting their rights in the digital age. The recommendations draw on commitments made at the **Generation Equality Forum** in Paris in 2021, where UN-Women convened the first multistakeholder platform dedicated to a common vision in addressing the gender digital divide: the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality.

In 2024, the negotiation of the **Global Digital Compact** offers a unique opportunity to build political momentum and place gender perspectives on digital technology at the core of a new digital governance framework. Proposed in the United Nations Secretary-General’s [Our Common Agenda](#), the compact is expected to be adopted at the **Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow**, hosted by the United Nations General Assembly in September.

This paper aims to help governments, policymakers, multilateral organizations, the private sector and civil society build consensus around a gender-transformative Global Digital Compact. A unique opportunity is at hand to influence a key framework to advance women’s and girls’ rights and empowerment.

The need for a groundbreaking digital framework is rooted in part in commitments by United Nations Member States to achieve gender equality and advance women’s rights. These commitments are enshrined in global treaties, most notably the Convention on the

In 2018, the **United Nations Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation** defined digital cooperation as working together to address the social, ethical, legal, and economic impact of digital technologies in order to maximize their benefits and minimize their harm.

Currently, a variety of digital cooperation initiatives and forums work on digital-related issues and innovation, but no framework captures governance in the digital space and the role that the United Nations can play as a platform for convening stakeholders and facilitating this process.

For this reason, the **Summit of the Future**, which aims to develop the frameworks of multilateralism so they are fit for the future, will include a chapter on science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation. The **Global Digital Compact** is part of this chapter, to forge a consensus on shared principles, objectives, and actions to address current gaps in digital governance.

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; in policy commitments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action<sup>1</sup> and the World Summit on the Information Society;<sup>2</sup> and in relevant consensus outcomes of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, most notably, the 2030 Agenda.<sup>3</sup> Central to this universal normative framework is the recognition that realizing gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment is relevant in every part of the world; it is everyone's responsibility; and it pertains to every policy area, including digital governance. Any new digital cooperation framework must build on achieving these commitments and have at its core a strong focus on dismantling structural barriers to gender equality.

This paper suggests a **dual track approach**. It identifies pathways to mainstream gender perspectives across Global Digital Compact themes. It also emphasizes a stand-alone goal on gender equality that elevates three fundamental topics; these need to be prioritized in every dimension to adequately address systems of gendered discrimination in the digital world that are often justified in the name of culture, history or group identity. This approach builds on language agreed by the sixty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women and in the 2030 Agenda and emphasizes:

1. **The inclusion of a stand-alone goal on gender equality:** Transforming gender relations requires changing the structures that underpin them, including in the digital world. Every action to build a new framework for digital cooperation must build on three dimensions that result in women and girls: (a) being able to lead lives free from technology-facilitated gender-based violence and discrimination; (b) realizing the expansion of educational and economic opportunities and equitable access to the wide range of resources offered by digital technologies on the same basis as men and boys; and (c) having a presence and voice in the full range of institutional fora (from private to public, local to global) where decisions on digital transformation are shaping individual lives and the functioning of families and societies.
2. **The robust mainstreaming of gender considerations across all parts of the framework:** The Global Digital Compact must not stop at promoting gender parity in access to digital tools and jobs or limit gender perspectives to safety issues. It should seek to promote transformation in gender relations in the digital age that would advance the freedom of all. The mainstreaming of a gender perspective in technology and innovation requires looking at how digitalization has exacerbated power asymmetries between the owners and users of digital services, and taking measures to distribute the benefits of digitalization more equally.

**These ideas are not new.** They derive from numerous normative and intergovernmental commitments to gender equality and women's rights as well as years of research and women's rights activism. Addressing them in a holistic and comprehensive manner, however, along the lines that this paper suggests, would constitute a major shift in digital policy and practice. Given that the Global Digital Compact will most likely determine the contours of digital cooperation for years to come, the world simply cannot afford to miss this once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the lives of women

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<sup>1</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 12. [E/CN.6/2023/L.3](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., para. 13.

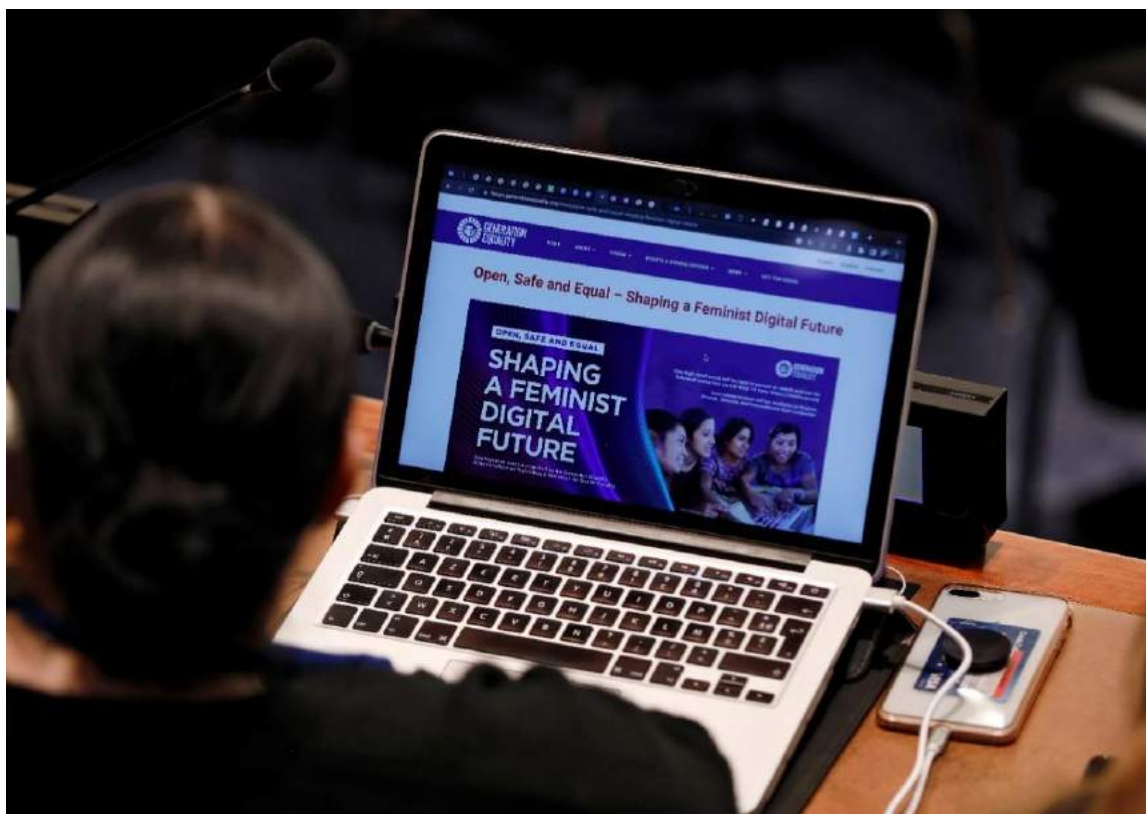
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., para. 14.

and girls and men and boys everywhere, and to **prevent digital technologies from becoming an incubator of new inequalities.**

### Taking action: Mobilization to make gender equality central to all Global Digital Compact objectives

In 2023, the leaders of the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality launched a “Year of Action” to mobilize stakeholders to put gender perspectives and the goal of gender equality at the core of all themes and objectives of the Global Digital Compact. At the seventy-eighth session of the General Assembly, a core group of Member States committed to work together and with all stakeholders to mainstream gender perspectives across all GDC goals in the forthcoming negotiations and to advocate for women and girls’ equal access to and full participation in decision spaces on digitalization. The group included the **Governments of Finland, Rwanda, Chile, Armenia, Canada, Iceland, United States of America, Mexico, Austria and Georgia.**

At the 2023 Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto, UN-Women supported the launch of the Feminist Principles for including gender in the Global Digital Compact, led and developed by **civil society organizations** to align the voices of people and organizations working on the gender and digital agenda.



A side event at the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women on “Open, Safe and Equal – Shaping a Feminist Digital Future.” © UN-Women/Ryan Brown

## 2. Adopting a stand-alone goal on gender equality for transformative change

In 2020, the **Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation** included two recommendations focused on digital inclusion, and underscored the imperative of applying a gender lens to all aspects of digital cooperation and technologies.<sup>4</sup> The **High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism**, an initiative to improve international cooperation under Our Common Agenda, has highlighted that “we the peoples” are better represented in the multilateral system by placing gender equality at the heart of the multilateral architecture. It called for the **Summit of the Future** to include clear steps in that direction and warned that transformative shifts will not happen without fully mobilizing the capacities and resources of all people.<sup>5</sup>

**Global consultations on the Global Digital Compact** from June 2022 to April 2023 found that many stakeholders consider the gender digital divide as one of the most pervasive forms of digital inequality. A significant body of research produced for the sixty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women<sup>6</sup> showed that progress towards gender equality in technology and innovation continues to be far too slow. Based on this body of knowledge and feedback, it is critical to affirm that any new global framework on digital cooperation should include a stand-alone goal on gender equality for the following reasons:

- A stand-alone goal will **drive the transformation of the structural determinants of gender-based inequality**. Gender inequalities in access to digital tools, content, harms, financing and opportunities to participate in public and private decision-making on digital issues remain a major injustice. Current trends in digital transformation put the achievement of gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment at risk.
- **Progress in bridging digital divides will depend on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls in all their diversity**. Gender inequalities have held back progress in reaching the last mile and ensuring universal and meaningful digital access for all. A stand-alone goal emphasizes the instrumental role gender equality plays in helping to bring about a digital transformation that benefits everyone.
- The compact will be an important source of accountability for governments and all stakeholders. The inclusion of a stand-alone goal as well as the mainstreaming of gender considerations into other objectives will **give visibility to gender equality, ensuring that governments can be held accountable for progress**. Given the global commitments outlined above, it is important to retain and strengthen this accountability framework.

In his report to the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Secretary-General called for a **great paradigm shift** to reassert human agency over technology. He urged exploring new avenues to adopt a human-centric approach to digitalization, with the feminist

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<sup>4</sup> The Secretary-General's [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#), recommendations 1C and 1D.

<sup>5</sup> The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, [A Breakthrough for People and Planet](#), pp. 4, 13.

<sup>6</sup> UN-Women. 2022. [Innovation and Technological Change, and Education in the Digital Age for Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of All Women and Girls](#).



principles of inclusion, intersectionality and systemic change at its core.<sup>7</sup> To put people at the centre of the compact, its development needs to be based on the **fundamental premise that efforts to strengthen gender equality in digital cooperation are transformative and beneficial to everyone**, because they promote inclusiveness more broadly.

In advocating a stand-alone goal, this paper draws attention to three topics that impact and resonate across all eight themes of the compact, namely: freedom from technology-facilitated gender-based violence; equitable educational and economic opportunities; and equal voice, leadership and participation.



Hundreds of people gathered in Janakpur, Nepal in December 2019 to take part in a Women's March.

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on Innovation and Technological Change, and Education in the Digital Age for Achieving Gender Equality and The Empowerment of All Women and Girls, para. 11, [E/CN.6/2023/3](#).

## 2.1 Freedom from technology-facilitated gender-based violence and discrimination

### What is at stake?

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Violence against women and girls is a manifestation of gender discrimination that seriously inhibits their abilities to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis of equality with men and boys. There is a continuum between offline and online gender-based violence, with technology often aggravating the level of surveillance, trafficking or physical and psychological violence perpetrated by individuals, States or malicious groups. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence<sup>8</sup> forces women and girls to self-censor, de-platform or reduce their interaction in online spaces, limiting their participation in public life and undermining democracy and human rights. Women who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are at a greater risk of being harassed, particularly LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex plus) persons, women belonging to religious or ethnic minorities and young women and girls. Women in the public eye are targeted to a much greater extent than men, especially politicians, journalists, women human rights defenders,<sup>9</sup> and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI) ethics leaders.<sup>10</sup>

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is spreading rapidly and changing constantly as new technologies emerge, impacting every aspect of digital governance and causing laws and policies to lag behind. It limits meaningful connectivity for women and girls, undercuts their abilities to leverage digital tools to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is a common cybersecurity risk, leading to data breaches, identity thefts and the creation of deepfakes.<sup>11</sup> As one of the most common forms of human rights abuses online, technology-facilitated gender-based violence is closely linked to the spread of AI-powered sexist hate speech and gendered disinformation and misinformation. A recent survey of women journalists from 125 countries found that 73 per cent had suffered online violence in their work, with 30 per cent reporting that they self-censored in response.<sup>12</sup>

### Outcomes to achieve

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- A policy of zero tolerance in the digital environment for all forms of GBV and for harmful behaviours and narratives that undermine and discredit women's and girls' online and offline expression.<sup>13</sup>
- A strong commitment from States and non-State actors to improve redress and remedy but also prioritize preventive measures and ex-ante safeguards across all digital policy domains.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is any act committed or amplified by using digital tools or technologies causing physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm to women and girls because of their gender.

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 35.

<sup>10</sup> L. O'Neill. 2023. "These Women Tried to Warn Us About AI." *Rolling Stone*, 12 August. E. Chang. 2023. "The Consequences for Tech Whistleblowers: 'People Come After You'." *Bloomberg*, 27 July. L. Kassova. 2023. "Where Are All the 'Godmothers' of AI? Women's Voices Are Not Being Heard." *The Guardian*, 25 November.

<sup>11</sup> L. Hurst. 2023. "Generative AI Fueling Spread of Deepfake Pornography Across the Internet." *Euronews*, 20 October.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe. 2023. Study on the Impact of Artificial Intelligence Systems, Their Potential for Promoting Equality, Including Gender Equality, and the Risks They May Cause in Relation to Non-Discrimination (2023), p. 81.

- Enhanced international cooperation and policy coherence for the elimination and prevention of technology-facilitated gender-based violence. This should be aligned with the principles of victim- and/or survivor-centred approaches, and with full respect for human rights, access to justice, transparency, accountability and proportionality.<sup>15</sup>

## How to do it?

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- Strengthen multisectoral and coordinated approaches to develop, amend and expand legislation and policies on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, in consultation with women's rights organizations.<sup>16</sup>
- Ensure that public and private sector entities prioritize the prevention, elimination and responses to all forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence,<sup>17</sup> including through improved content moderation and curation; the interoperability, transparency, accessibility and effectiveness of reporting systems; and the establishment of robust and reliable content removal processes that are fully compliant with relevant obligations under international human rights law.<sup>18</sup>
- Create or reinforce public bodies that support people affected by technology-facilitated gender-based violence and algorithmic discrimination, including through social and legal services, information and awareness campaigns, investigation and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, collective action and routes for redress and the monitoring of cases.<sup>19</sup>
- Foster collaboration among stakeholders, including national statistics offices, civil society organizations, United Nations entities and digital technology companies to develop internationally accepted standards and methodologies to measure technology-facilitated gender-based violence and track its patterns, including over time.<sup>20</sup>

**Taking action:** Several countries have developed government support for victim-survivors of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including through the creation of dedicated, statutorily empowered bodies, such as the **Australian eSafety Commissioner** and **New Zealand's Netsafe**. These provide a variety of legal and non-legal options, for example, direct support to remove content from the Internet, the development of educational tools, information on legal rights, mediation and dispute-resolution services.

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<sup>15</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., para. (ppp) and the Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (aa).

<sup>17</sup> These forms can, for example, include "the use of digital tools, including social media and online platforms, for the purpose of harassment, hate speech and racism against women and girls, trafficking in persons and all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls, as well as for child, early and forced marriage and forced labour, and any non-consensual sharing of personal, sexually explicit content of women and the production and distribution of child pornography, also known as child sexual exploitation and abuse material". Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (nnn).

<sup>18</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (vvv).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., para. (rrr), and the Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, paras. (iii) and (ooo), and the Report of the Secretary-General on Gender Statistics for the fifty-fifth session of the United Nations Statistical Commission.

## 2.2 Equitable educational and economic opportunities

### What is at stake?

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The High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation Report stated that “the people being left behind are typically those who can least afford it”. As a consequence of structural inequalities in access to knowledge and resources, women and girls face persistent and profound barriers to thriving in the digital economy. Nearly all countries have gender gaps in digital skills and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies; these disparities have negative repercussions throughout women’s lives. Gender power relations and associations in the educational sphere are brought forward, and often magnified, in the workplace.<sup>21</sup> Globally, women in the technology sector occupy less than one third of positions and face a gender pay gap of 21 per cent; 48 per cent have experienced workplace harassment.<sup>22</sup> This limits access to fast-growing and well-paid careers,<sup>23</sup> translates into fewer opportunities as digital entrepreneurs and innovators, and impacts resilience to changes due to technology.

Current digital innovation ecosystems are characterized by an uneven distribution of power and financial resources, with emerging technologies such as AI dominated by concentrations of capital. In 2020, only 2 per cent of global venture capital funding was invested in start-ups solely founded by women.<sup>24</sup> While much attention has focused on highly paid professional jobs, less acknowledged is the dependence of digital technologies on a vast “precarious” human labour force. Workers who carry out skilled technological work, such as data labelling or content moderation, are mostly located in low-income countries. Jobs generated by the rise of the platform economy are highly unregulated and often characterized by lower pay, instability and a lack of labour protection and entitlements.<sup>25</sup> Awareness of these issues alone does not necessarily lead to corporate or governmental policy changes, and there has been limited public and private sector investment in influencing these ecosystems’ structures.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- The elimination of occupational segregation and other structural barriers and the expansion of women’s educational and occupational opportunities in emerging STEM fields and the information and communications technology (ICT) sector,<sup>26</sup> including by ensuring safe work and educational environments, and taking affirmative and corrective steps to address the historical and structural exclusion of marginalized communities.
- Women and girls have equal opportunities to access education, resources and financial support to thrive in the digital economy.

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<sup>21</sup> UN-Women. 2020. The Digital Revolution: Implications for Gender Equality and Women’s Rights 25 Years After Beijing, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 61.

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 61, such as social security, child or long-term care services or care leave policies, or the right to engage in collective action.

<sup>26</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (rr).

## How to do it?

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- Place the responsibility for driving change on those responsible for creating supportive workplaces and educational settings,<sup>27</sup> and put in place accountability mechanisms to ensure that they fulfil obligations to address negative social norms and gender stereotypes, and eliminate gender disparities in STEM and ICT.
- Advance intersectoral working bodies and coordination to drive the development of gender and STEM policies.<sup>28</sup>
- Significantly increase public and private investments in evidence-based initiatives aimed at bridging the gender digital divide, building more inclusive innovation ecosystems and supporting women's entry into and retention in the digital economy.<sup>29</sup>

**Taking action:** As a leader of the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality, the Government of **Chile** committed to launching a **National Gender Equality Policy for Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation**. It includes the creation of an interministerial committee to implement a "50/50 by 2030" Action Plan, which links efforts by the Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation; the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Gender Equity; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Undersecretariat of Telecommunications.

The Government of **Rwanda** has committed to bridging the gender gap in three specific areas by 2026: ownership of smartphones, access to digital financial services and STEM studies at the upper-secondary level.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., para. 61.

<sup>28</sup> C. M. Rojas. 2023. Public Policies for Gender Equality in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Challenges for the Economic Autonomy of Women and Transformative Recovery in Latin America, p. 45. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

<sup>29</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (y).

## 2.3 Equal voice, leadership and participation

### What is at stake?

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Women's capacity to influence decision-making in the digital age, whether in public or private institutions, is intimately linked to their capabilities. Gender disparities are significant in the digital economy. Over half of women in tech leave the industry by the midpoint of their career – more than double the rate of men – resulting in many fewer women reaching leadership roles. Globally, women account for only 17 per cent of managers in the information technology industry and 3 per cent of chief executives. In the 111 countries with chief information officers, only 11 per cent are women.<sup>30</sup> Even when women reach senior positions, they tend to be excluded from the most strategic decision-making roles. Data on ministerial portfolios show that women generally dominate only in the social sectors and rarely hold economy, trade, defence or digital portfolios. In the private sector, women in executive roles in tech companies typically lead in human resources, finance and marketing functions.

Meaningful participation or leadership is about more than just a numeric presence in decision-making fora. It requires the strategic representation of issues that matter to different groups of women as well as abilities and opportunities to challenge existing power structures. Much of the work on gender-biased AI, for example, has emerged from women-led programmes and institutions. In general, the perpetual underrepresentation of women in digital governance, especially those from marginalized groups, results in a lack of recognition of their critical voices and fewer options to be recognized as real power brokers and visible experts. Digital cooperation must reflect the rich and diverse views of women all over the world as they can connect digital transformation to their own lived realities. Effective governance of digital technologies and data requires that women in all their diversity have a seat at the table, are listened to and can influence decisions made to shape a shared digital future.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- Gender parity in decision-making roles and the representation of women from different backgrounds, including for professionals working on digital governance, policy, compliance, ethics, safety or security, and for all roles that are critically important to fully harnessing digital opportunities for sustainable development.
- Removal of barriers to women's equal access to power, decision-making and leadership in digital cooperation, ensuring their full recognition and legitimacy to influence public priorities, spending patterns and accountability systems.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 19. Catalyst. 2022. "[Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics \(STEM\) \(Quick Take\)](#)."

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (p).

## How to do it?

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- Take concrete measures for the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women in the digital and technology sectors, especially in policy, regulatory and governance processes,<sup>32</sup> including through positive action and quotas.<sup>33</sup>
- Provide funding, sponsorship and training to enhance the professional development and participation of women leaders in the digital age, especially for youth and underrepresented groups, and to facilitate their involvement in negotiations, expert panels and advisory boards.<sup>34</sup>
- Promote institutional shifts to remove exclusionary practices and language and imbalances in the distribution of power, and encourage men to become strong allies in eliminating cultural practices embedded within technology ecosystems that lead to “chilly” workplace climates for women and minorities.<sup>35</sup>

**Taking action:** In 2023, the Secretary-General announced the creation of a new [Artificial Intelligence Advisory Body](#) to look at the risks, opportunities and international governance of AI. It comprises diverse individuals in terms of geography, gender, discipline and age. While women usually represent 22 per cent of AI workers, this High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence demonstrates the Secretary-General’s commitment to greater gender balance. Of its 38 members, 20 are women, working in governments, the private sector, civil society and academia.

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<sup>32</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (xx).

<sup>33</sup> Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 89. Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (p).

<sup>34</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (p).

<sup>35</sup> UN-Women’s report on the digital revolution, p. 23.



### 3. Mainstreaming gender in all global digital compact themes

A **feminist perspective on digital governance** considers the economic, social and political circumstances that influence not only the use of digital technologies but also their design and technical content. The disproportionate and distinct effects of digitalization on women and girls must be recognized and addressed to prevent the reinforcement of negative social norms and gender stereotypes. Choices of global consequence will be made in formulating the Global Digital Compact. The process must draw attention to how digital governance decisions can advance equality, particularly women's and girls' rights in the digital age.

The integration of gender perspectives in digital cooperation is often narrowly focused on access or safety issues or the adoption of ex post measures. It typically **overlooks questions of power and inequality and fails to recognize that technologies are socially shaped by culture** and, therefore, reflect history, context, choices and values. Technology developers often make technologically deterministic claims about “effects”, assuming that technology impinges on society from the outside and that technological change is autonomous and value free, and itself causes social change.<sup>36</sup> Digital technologies can provide new opportunities for women's empowerment but technology on its own cannot address the systemic problems driving the digital gender divide. Gender-based digital exclusion – and, indeed, inclusion – must be located in broader structural trends and institutional changes, such as persistent poverty and rising inequalities, democratic backsliding and the increasing power of private corporations.<sup>37</sup> The concentration of economic and political power in the tech sector as well as its resistance to regulation are preventing efforts to manage or respond to the rapidly developing challenges and opportunities of digital technology. **The serious harm and discrimination against women and girls triggered by new digital technologies have highlighted the need for more ethical reflection and global governance.**

**Taking action: The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes so that actors in policymaking incorporate a gender equality perspective in all policies at all levels and stages.**

The Committee of Ministers, the Council's statutory decision-making body, commissioned a review of the impact of AI and its potential for promoting equality, including gender equality, as well as risks of discrimination. Findings have informed the negotiation of the draft **Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law**.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of ethical and responsible frameworks developed by civil society organizations, companies, governments and multistakeholder partnerships. These have sought to articulate principles to mitigate risks and spread technological benefits. Many cover the prevention of bias, safety and the protection of privacy. Only a few adopt a gender-transformative approach or call, for example, for AI systems to “help to eliminate relationships of domination between groups and people based on differences of power, wealth, or knowledge”.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 32.



Most frameworks have no safeguards, resulting in diverging interests undermining their application and oversight. Self-governance systems put in place by companies have been underpowered. Internal human rights or ethical AI teams and external oversight boards are often not in a position to influence structural or design decisions that may curb technology-facilitated gender-based violence, bias or privacy issues.<sup>39</sup>

To trigger transformative changes in digital governance, this paper makes the following recommendations to strengthen gender mainstreaming in all Global Digital Compact themes. These are geared towards **a framework that delivers tangible benefits and safeguards to people and societies**, and helps to bridge gaps between principles and practical impacts.<sup>40</sup>



Women farmer in Mali testing the “Buy from Women” platform. ©UN-Women/Alou Mbaye

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., para. 33.

<sup>40</sup> AI Advisory Body. 2023. Interim Report: Governing AI for Humanity, p. 79.

## 3.1 Digital connectivity and capacity-building

### What is at stake?

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Digital divides reflect and amplify existing social, cultural and economic inequalities and gender stereotypes. There has long been an assumption that the use of digital tools and services will increase with universal Internet access. Improvement in infrastructure alone, however, is not sufficient for “meaningful access” for all women and girls.<sup>41</sup> Other factors, such as affordability, digital literacy and skills, privacy and safety, content, relevance, ownership, awareness, agency and access to electricity are equally critical. Gender and social norms are at play in each of those dimensions. Overlaying digital tools and services onto existing gender gaps compounds risks of limiting connectivity for the most marginalized – unless incentives and targeted support accompany digitalization.<sup>42</sup>

Women and girls are 25 per cent less likely than men to have sufficient knowledge and digital skills to use technology to gain access to digital services. This requires increasing digital literacy, which should comprise basic competencies as well as technical and transferable skills that help women and girls to be safe and empowered in using digital technology.<sup>43</sup> A shared vision of digital cooperation should aim to create conditions for women and girls to equally harness and benefit from the Internet, and recognize there is not a singular, universal type of gender digital divide. Currently, very few indicators can be used to measure digital inclusion. Average data mask significant differences among people, across regions and within countries, with gaps even more acute for older women, women living in rural areas and those with disabilities. This limits the knowledge and capacity of decision-makers to develop effective, evidence-based policies and programmes that adequately capture and address the gendered dimensions of technological change.<sup>44</sup>

### Outcomes to achieve

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- The benefits of digital technologies are available to all through expanded efforts to close the gender digital divide that are grounded in digital equity.<sup>45</sup>
- Barriers are removed and support provided for non-users and the least connected, especially women and girls, to achieve universal, meaningful, high-quality and affordable connectivity.<sup>46</sup>
- Everyone is equipped with the knowledge, awareness and skills to leverage connectivity for economic and social empowerment, and digital services are tailored to be accessible and valuable to women and girls in all their diversity.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> At present, 76 per cent of the population living in the least developed countries is covered by a mobile broadband signal. Only 25 per cent is online, however, with men 52 per cent more likely to be online than women. See the report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, para. (oo).

<sup>44</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, paras. (f) and (d).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 18, and the report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 14.

## How to do it?

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- Fully implement existing commitments and obligations to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls,<sup>48</sup> including by taking an intersectional approach to gender gaps in digital access and competencies and ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital age, in line with the Agreed Conclusions from the sixty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women.
- Mainstream gender perspectives in national digital policies, laws, programmes and budgets, and coordinate actions, subsidies and incentives to achieve universal and affordable connectivity, expand digital learning and literacy, and facilitate access to ICT for all women and girls.<sup>49</sup>
- Foster collaboration among stakeholders to assess and address data gaps, including by systematically collecting data disaggregated by sex, and developing and using similar definitions and methodologies across countries and regions to measure digital inclusion.<sup>50</sup>

**Taking action: There are some examples of clear targets for women's inclusion in national broadband plans. Botswana's national broadband strategy includes gendered targets for smartphone access, digital literacy and ICT graduates.**

**Senegal's digital plan comprises a high-level commitment to mainstream gender in all broadband policy decisions.**

**In Costa Rica, the national broadband plan encompasses women's access as a core component and sets targets for women's online entrepreneurship.**

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<sup>48</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (a).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., paras. (d) and (f).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., para. (iii), and the report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 24.

## 3.2 Digital cooperation to accelerate progress on the sustainable development goals

### What is at stake?

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International cooperation on digital technology has focused on technical and infrastructure issues and the digital economy, often at the expense of how technological developments affect society and generate disruption across its layers, especially for the most vulnerable and historically excluded groups. Digitalization has often been portrayed as an equalizer of opportunities. Yet it has continued a pattern of gender-blind innovation already seen in the “analog world”, where the development of technological solutions fails to take into account gender, age, race, locality, disability, income or the sociotechnical infrastructure of low-income countries.<sup>51</sup>

The integration of a gender perspective in technology and innovation is crucial to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda as it can help accelerate progress on many SDGs. This requires increasing the number of initiatives that directly target women and girls but also systemically including gender and intersectional perspectives<sup>52</sup> in all global or sectoral digital programmes creating knowledge, tools, capacity or services around AI, agritech, fintech, e-health, e-governance and edtech, among many other elements.<sup>53</sup> This will help to avoid the pitfalls of techno-solutionism that often characterize the development of these technologies as well as the consequences of the failure to consider social, economic and environmental factors in design and deployment.<sup>54</sup>

### Outcomes to achieve

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- The enhanced efficiency, accountability and transparency of public services and infrastructure through the use of ICT for the benefit of all women and girls, including those who are hardest to reach.<sup>55</sup>
- A whole-of-society approach that combines knowledge, skills and resources to build gender-responsive digital services and a more inclusive digital environment.<sup>56</sup>
- Standards and practices to reduce the environmental impacts and energy consumption of the Internet and digital technologies and minimize harm from extracting natural resources to fuel new technologies.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 9.

<sup>52</sup> The experience of women is not universal. It is necessary to pay attention to intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and age, among other factors.

<sup>53</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 25.

<sup>54</sup> For further examples of intersectional bias in AI and how it reproduces racism, sexism and other forms of social injustice, see Y. Kong. 2022. “(Un)Fairness in AI: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis.”

<sup>55</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (uu).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., para. (x).

<sup>57</sup> APC (Association for Progressive Communications), Policy, Digital Rights Foundation et al. 2023. “[The Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact](#).” See also the Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which “recognized the disproportionate and distinct effects of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters on women and girls”, para. (j).

## How to do it?

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- Tie funding<sup>58</sup> for public sector programmes, research grants and procurement related to digital technology to obligations to systematically integrate gender analysis, targets and disaggregated data collection.<sup>59</sup>
- Increase public and private sector investment in the development of digital public goods based on accessibility, safety, sustainability, inclusivity, affordability and availability, and catering to the needs of all women and girls throughout the life course.<sup>60</sup>
- Deepen cooperation and put in place building blocks for inclusive and gender-responsive digital public infrastructure, promote knowledge-sharing and technology transfer, and strengthen digital and data capacity-building to address the gender digital divide and support the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>61</sup>

**Taking action:** India's 2023 Presidency of the G20 highlighted the cross-cutting issue of gender and women's economic empowerment along with **digital public infrastructure (DPI)**. It drew on the results of India's **Jan Dhan infrastructure**, which has provided basic banking account access to 479 million people since 2014. More than half of these accounts are owned by women.

G20 leaders officially recognized the benefits of digital public infrastructure that is "safe, secure, trusted, accountable, and inclusive", marking the first multilaterally agreed language on digital public infrastructure.

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<sup>58</sup> In 2021, [Horizon Europe](#), the European Union key funding programme for research and innovation, introduced a new eligibility criterion, making it mandatory for applicants to have a gender equality plan (GEP) in place.

<sup>59</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 25.

<sup>60</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (ccc).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, para. (aaa), and the report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 23.

### 3.3 Upholding human rights

#### What is at stake?

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Many tech developers focus on the rapid market entry of new digital tools without thorough risk and impact analysis of potential societal harms or discrimination against marginalized groups. Laws and regulations often do not keep pace with recent technological development, making it difficult to hold governments or corporations accountable for violations. The tremendous potential of emerging technologies to accelerate the SDGs cannot be delivered based on the current business model. Digital technologies should be developed within a regulatory framework that prioritizes, protects and promotes human rights by default, rather than one that permits abuse or exploitation as part of their business model, the consequences of which are only addressed after they have occurred.<sup>62</sup>

The serious and disproportionate harm and discrimination against women and girls triggered by new digital technologies, especially technology-facilitated gender-based violence, have shown that providing safe, inclusive and equal access to ICT for all women and girls is essential for the full enjoyment of their human rights, whether civil and political or economic, social and cultural. This requires embedding participatory design into the development of new digital tools, centred around the voices of marginalized and vulnerable women and girls. It also requires policies that balance and proportionally address tensions around multiple rights when regulating online spaces and tools, including the right to safety, movement, participation in public life, freedom of expression and privacy.<sup>63</sup> The contributions of civil society organizations are also crucial to place women and girls' interests, needs and visions on local, national, regional and international digital agendas, especially youth-led, grassroots, rural or Indigenous organizations, as well as media professionals and trade unions.

#### Outcomes to achieve

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- The human rights of women and girls in all their diversity are promoted, respected and fulfilled in the conception, design, development, deployment, evaluation and regulation of digital technologies, and are subject to adequate safeguards.<sup>64</sup>
- Regulations factor in the voices and experiences of women and girls to improve accountability and address any human rights violations and abuses caused by digital products and services.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 15

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 41.

## How to do it?

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- Take targeted measures to identify and eliminate all forms of discrimination and human rights violations against women and girls that can occur through the use of technology, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence, harmful surveillance applications and discrimination by proxy.<sup>66</sup>
- Commit to adopt, expand or amend digital policies, laws and industry standards in full compliance with international human rights norms, towards ensuring women's and girls' access to justice, accountability for violations and abuses of their human rights and effective remedies.<sup>67</sup>
- Adopt a human rights-based approach as standard in the financing, design, development, deployment, monitoring and evaluation of emerging technologies to prevent, identify and mitigate potential risks for women and girls.<sup>68</sup>
- Support the important role of civil society actors in promoting and protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women and girls in the digital age, and encourage a culture fostering collective bargaining in relation to the digitalization of the workplace.<sup>69</sup>

**Taking action:** To promote participatory design, the **UW Tech Policy Lab** developed the [Diverse Voices method](#). It provides a toolkit for engaging experts from underrepresented groups to provide feedback on draft technology policy documents. The leaders of the **Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality** devised a [digital guide](#) to learn about and provide practical guidance to create gender-transformative technology.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., paras. (c) and (qqq). See also [The Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact](#) and the Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (c).

<sup>68</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (s).

<sup>69</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (mmm), and the Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 90.



## 3.4 An inclusive, open, secure and shared Internet

### What is at stake?

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The Internet began as a global network where people could access information and instantly communicate with anyone in the world. Created on a unique foundation that empowers users to collectively shape its evolution, it has become a worldwide resource that supports commerce, education, the delivery of essential services, entertainment and much more. Yet a variety of business developments and governmental regulations could put the future of its governance model at risk.<sup>70</sup>

The Global Digital Compact is an opportunity to preserve the principles on which the Internet was built and to strengthen its global governance so that present and future generations can equally benefit from:

- An **inclusive** Internet that allows everyone everywhere to connect without restrictions, no matter who they are or where they are located.
- An **open** Internet that is easy to connect to and equally allows people and organizations to connect, without permission and with minimal barriers.
- A **secure** Internet that is resistant to attacks on its infrastructure, and that protects the confidentiality, integrity and availability of data, especially for the most vulnerable.
- A **shared** Internet where a variety of public and private sector stakeholders work together to advance its inclusive multistakeholder model.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- The Internet's universality, integrity and openness are protected and sustained, and it remains a global resource that protects and empowers users in all their diversity, without hindering their freedom.<sup>71</sup>
- Gender mainstreaming in Internet governance is affirmed along with the shared responsibility of all stakeholders to promote a democratic, participatory, consensus-driven, transparent, accountable, equitable, open and collaborative system, managed in the public interest.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Internet Society. 2021. [Enablers of an Open, Globally Connected, Secure and Trustworthy Internet](#).

<sup>71</sup> AccessNow. 2022. "[Why Internet Shutdowns Are Even Worse for Women](#)." See also the [Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Internet Shutdowns: Trends, Causes, Legal Implications and Impacts on a Range of Human Rights](#), para. 38. A/HRC/50/55.

<sup>72</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (d).



## How to do it?

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- Commit to systematically assess how Internet governance decisions might impact different groups of people, especially women and girls, and adopt transformative approaches.
- Commit to avoiding Internet shutdowns and actions that would compromise critical infrastructure and an open, interconnected Internet.<sup>73</sup>
- Promote multistakeholder approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality and bridge the gender digital divide,<sup>74</sup> including by establishing a Global Commission on Just and Sustainable Digitalization.<sup>75</sup>
- Promote and preserve cultural and linguistic diversity on the Internet to enable women and girls to receive and impart information in their own languages, especially those of Indigenous or non-majority groups and people with disabilities, and ensure greater linguistic representation in AI training data.<sup>76</sup>

**Taking action:** The [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) provide a single shared standard for web content accessibility. They were developed through the World Wide Web Consortium, which encourages broad community input and consensus on development among a variety of stakeholders. It helps make Web content more accessible, primarily for people with disabilities. One example entails recommending text alternatives for any non-text content so that it can be changed into other forms, such as speech or large print. In some jurisdictions, conformity to these guidelines is required by law to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities.

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<sup>73</sup> United Nations. 2023. [A Global Digital Compact – an Open, Free and Secure Digital Future for All](#). Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 5.

<sup>74</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (x).

<sup>75</sup> Report of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Despite there being over 7,000 spoken languages worldwide, Unicode – the standard for text and emoticons – only supports approximately 150. M. Kupfer. 2023. [“A More Inclusive Internet For Who? Non-English Speakers In Digital Spaces.”](#) Internet Society Foundation, 20 February. K. Emslie. 2020. [We Need to Talk About Linguistic Diversity in AI.](#) ACM News, 6 August.

## 3.5 Digital trust and security

### What is at stake?

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Many factors contribute to mistrust in the deployment and use of digital technology and data by governments, the private sector or individuals. Examples encompass breaches in data privacy; malicious and criminal cyber activities; digital surveillance that infringes on people's rights, especially women's rights activists and journalists; Internet shutdowns; predatory business models; AI bias and hallucinations; the rise of misinformation and disinformation; and the spread of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Populations that have been excluded from accessing digital tools, especially in the Global South, are disproportionately impacted by digital harms. Equal access to digital skills is crucial to understand and use digital services productively, identify security threats and measures to mitigate them, and prevent serious risks to societal trust and democratic debate linked to unreliable information. Fostering a responsible digital transformation requires more than setting cybersecurity standards. It is about having trustworthy digital technologies and service providers who protect the interests of all stakeholders and uphold societal expectations and values.<sup>77</sup> The responsible design and use of digital technologies are not solely technological challenges. They involve building credibility and transparency, and showing users, especially the most vulnerable, a strong commitment to security, safety, reliability, ethics and gender-transformative development.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- Strengthened multistakeholder cooperation to elaborate and implement gender-transformative norms, guidelines and principles relating to the responsible, inclusive and ethical development and use of digital technologies, including security, reliability, transparency, accountability and oversight.
- Improved digital resilience among people and organizations so they have sufficient knowledge to trust their use of technology and reduce the risk of economic abuse, cybercrime, fraud and trafficking.<sup>78</sup>

### How to do it?

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- Take mandatory measures to enhance accountability and transparency, such as requiring gender impact assessments, co-regulatory approaches and due diligence obligations to address risks posed by digital technologies, especially risks to democracy, information integrity, the rule of law, social cohesion and cultural diversity.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> World Economic Forum. 2022. [Earning Digital Trust: Decision-Making for Trustworthy Technologies](#).

<sup>78</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (oo).

<sup>79</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 33, and the report of the AI Advisory Body, p. 11.

- Strengthen the capacity and active cooperation of policymakers, regulators, law enforcement officials and the judiciary to effectively address new risks, disputes and regulatory challenges arising from digitalization, especially in transnational contexts.<sup>80</sup>
- Adopt a human-centred approach to cybersecurity, based on gender-, age- and disability-inclusive standards for technology design, development, deployment and use.<sup>81</sup>
- Invest in gender-responsive educational opportunities linked to digital media and information literacy,<sup>82</sup> digital citizenship<sup>83</sup> and multidisciplinary approaches to ethics in the digital era.

**Taking action:** The European Union’s draft regulation on AI includes an obligation to conduct a **Fundamental Rights Impact Assessment** before deploying high-risk AI systems.

The Government of Singapore is piloting a governance framework and toolkit known as **AIVerify**, where AI system developers and owners must demonstrate their claims about the performance of their AI systems.

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<sup>80</sup> Report of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, p. 43, and the Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, para. (uuu).

<sup>81</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (ccc).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, para. (p).

<sup>83</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (k), and the Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 90.

## 3.6 Data protection and empowerment

### What is at stake?

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Every day, millions of people worldwide share their personal information on the Internet as they access content, use digital services or shop. This personal information is sold and collected by companies but also accessed by government agencies. It may sometimes be used in ways that harm people and communities, especially minorities, people on the move, LGBTQI+ people, marginalized groups or women and girls seeking access to sexual and reproductive health services. Without regulations to guarantee transparency and accountability in how public and private sector entities collect, use, share, archive and delete data, people cannot easily opt out of data selling and sharing, stop being tracked, have a right to know what's being collected about them, and to correct or delete such information.

The gender digital divide results in women producing less data, while the lack of disaggregated data leads to the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of certain groups in data sets.<sup>84</sup> Recent studies have shown that stereotypical or derogatory associations along the lines of gender and race are often overrepresented in AI training data, exceeding their prevalence in the general population and setting up AI models trained on these datasets to further amplify biases. This gender-biased technology affects individuals but also contributes to setbacks in gender equality and women's empowerment as it creates negative social impacts and harms society at large.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- Data governance and regulations are interoperable and consistent with international law and the right to privacy so that unwanted harm (safety risks) and vulnerabilities to attack (security risks) are properly prevented, addressed and eliminated.<sup>85</sup>
- Women and girls in all their diversity provide their free, explicit and informed consent to the collection, processing, use and storage of their personal data, and to their reuse, sale or resale, especially for sensitive data.<sup>86</sup>

### How to do it?

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- Apply gender-responsive and human rights-based standards to data collection, use, sharing, archiving and deletion, especially to ensure the privacy of women's sensitive personal data and to strengthen the capacity of women and girls to create, curate and control their personal data.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 34, and the Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, para. 46.

<sup>85</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 31.

<sup>86</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. 39.

<sup>87</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. (y), and the Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, para. (jjj).

- Adopt regulations to provide secure and transparent high-quality data infrastructure and systems that reflect the social, political and historical context of data sets in order to prevent and address human rights violations and abuses as well as gender biases.<sup>88</sup>
- Encourage cooperation among regulatory bodies and agencies, including data protection authorities, equality bodies, national human rights institutions and consumer protection agencies.<sup>89</sup>
- Develop a gender-transformative Global Data Compact<sup>90</sup> to tackle the gender data gap, use data productively and safely, protect women and girls from digital harms and overcome data concentrations among a few global actors.

**Taking action:** The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) introduced a **data protection impact assessment** as mandatory for any processing of personal data likely to result in a high risk for individuals. An assessment must contain measures to address identified risks, including safeguards, security measures and mechanisms to protect personal data.

It is required whenever processing is likely to result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of individuals, at least in the following cases:

- A systematic and extensive evaluation of the personal aspects of an individual, including profiling.
- Processing of sensitive data on a large scale.
- Systematic monitoring of public areas on a large scale.

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<sup>88</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (fff).

<sup>89</sup> Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 87.

<sup>90</sup> Report of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, p. 43.

## 3.7 Agile governance of AI and other emerging technologies

### What is at stake?

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The High-Level Advisory Body on AI has recognized the global governance deficit<sup>91</sup> in addressing the challenges and risks of AI and harnessing its potential to leave no one behind. So far, self-regulation has resulted in many companies ignoring or underinvesting in efforts that ensure their systems or products equally benefit all population groups and prevent harm or unfair treatment, especially for women and girls. In the current AI architecture, benefits and risks are not equitably distributed, with power concentrated in the hands of a few corporations, States and individuals, who control talent, data and computer resources. There is no mechanism to constrain developers from releasing AI systems before they are ready and safe, leading many actors to launch products to try to gain and retain dominant market positions even without meeting privacy, security and bias standards, and at the expense of the public.

There is also no mechanism to look at broader considerations like new forms of social vulnerability generated by AI, the disruption of industries and labour markets, the propensity for emerging technology to be used as a tool of oppression, the sustainability of the AI supply chain or the impact of AI on future generations. Building gender-transformative AI governance frameworks requires adopting common global strategies not only to prevent and provide redress when AI systems exhibit gender or racial bias or reinforce harmful stereotypes but also to reshape the current AI ecosystem to address these considerations and the trust deficit in the governance model.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- An agreed governance mechanism on emerging technologies and AI adequately integrates gender perspectives across all normative and institutional dimensions, adopts global norms and principles, improves policy and regulatory coherence across sectors, and ensures the interoperability of standards and guidance.
- Meaningful transparency and accountability regimes ground AI development and scale-up in universal norms and values, and improve fairness, reliability, safety, interpretability and accountability to human control.

### How to do it?

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- Establish a globally networked and adaptive multistakeholder governance model and adopt comprehensive national action plans on AI and equality to consolidate prevention, transparency and accountability measures.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Report of the AI Advisory Body, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> United Nations report on the Global Digital Compact and the Council of Europe study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, p. 84.

- Adopt regulations on internal and external evaluation and audit requirements for developing and using AI, including life cycle impact assessments<sup>93</sup> on the effects of emerging technologies on achieving gender equality.<sup>94</sup>
- Set up liability regimes for harms caused by AI, and prohibit AI systems that do not meet baseline standards and comply with international human rights law.
- Build capacity and assemble cross-functional teams that combine technical and social science knowledge, taking a multidisciplinary approach that ensures that all population groups equally benefit from new services, and that prevents harm and unfair treatment.<sup>95</sup>
- Allow access to probe AI models and increase investment in independent research on responsible AI governance and the prevention and elimination of AI discrimination and bias.
- Make systematic efforts to improve meaningful access to AI, especially for developing economies and marginalized communities, including by increasing resources and capacities to operate AI models.

**Taking action:** In 2023, [several philanthropies](#) in the United States announced that they will be collectively contributing more than **\$200 million to fund public interest efforts to mitigate AI harms** and promote responsible use and innovation. They committed to aligning their investments behind actions to: ensure that AI protects democracy, rights and freedoms, and delivers breakthroughs to improve the quality of life for people around the world; empower workers to thrive amid AI-driven changes across sectors and industries; improve interpretability, transparency and accountability for AI models, companies and deployers; and support the development of international AI rules and norms.

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<sup>93</sup> [Algorithmic Bias, Financial Inclusion, and Gender](#), Women's World Banking presented a Python-based toolkit to show how financial services providers can detect and mitigate gender biases in credit score models.

<sup>94</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, paras. (ddd) and (fff).

<sup>95</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 30.

## 3.8 Global digital commons

### What is at stake?

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Digital technologies are increasingly considered to be essential resources and basic services that should be accessible to and managed in the interests of all members of society. However, the current operating system and governance of many emerging digital technologies is often characterized by:

- A lack of regulations.
- Privately owned foundational digital infrastructure.
- A rise in authoritarian uses.

This situation is negatively impacting abilities to leverage technology to target the most significant social issues, such as climate change, public health and economic inequality. It has been tied to an eroding information ecosystem, increased political polarization, concerns about privacy and surveillance, and significant algorithmic bias across lines of race, gender and class.<sup>96</sup>

The Global Digital Compact is an opportunity to reverse this trend and build a digital ecosystem that ensures broadly shared participation and prosperity, and considers the digital commons as the preferred pathway for creating and sharing societal value.

### Outcomes to achieve

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- Digital technologies and data are not the property of a few but are safeguarded as “global commons” resources and a collective public good that help to achieve equitable and sustainable development for all.<sup>97</sup>
- The governance and management of digital technologies and data are conducted in line with the public interest, and impacted people and communities, especially women in all their diversity, are actively included in all processes to ensure more equitable outcomes.

### How to do it?

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- Take concrete measures to harness and design digital technologies for the common good, and promote norms and mechanisms facilitating accessibility and the fair distribution of the benefits of digital technologies for sustainable development and gender equality, such as global data commons.<sup>98</sup>
- Invest in the capacity to develop harmonized and modular frameworks that enable the technical conception and hosting capacity of the digital commons, and prevent, mitigate and remedy digital harms.

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<sup>96</sup> D. Siddarth and E. G. Weyl. 2021. The Case for the Digital Commons. World Economic Forum.

<sup>97</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on innovation and technological change, para. 34.

<sup>98</sup> Sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions, para. (ggg).



- Support communities of practice that foster collaboration and cooperative learning for creating and advancing the digital commons as well as for defining the scope of democratic and innovative forms of ownership and control.<sup>99</sup>

**Taking action:** Several European countries are working on developing a [sovereign digital infrastructure of the commons](#). In 2023, the Government of France announced an investment of €40 million for an open “digital commons” for French-made generative AI projects.

Agence Française de Développement has made the digital commons a driving force of its digital transition strategy. It launched a [mapping of digital commons in sub-Saharan Africa](#), listing dimensions such as collaborative mapping, open-source software for public health services and community networks to access the Internet.

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<sup>99</sup> J. Meadway. 2020. [Creating a Digital Commons](#). IPPR and the Centre for Economic Justice.

## 4. Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015 is entitled “**Transforming Our World.**” It includes achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls as a cross-cutting theme and a stand-alone goal because much can be learned from feminism and women's rights movements in realizing this transformative vision and breaking the vicious circle that produces poverty, inequality and environmental destruction. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the exponential advancement of digital technologies has had a disruptive effect on almost all aspects of human lives. Yet it has not delivered on its promise to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. Mainstreaming gender perspectives in digital cooperation has the potential to trigger transformations that set countries on paths to an open, free, secure and inclusive digital future for all.

This paper presents practical ways to identify challenges and drivers that underpin digital divides and structural impediments to gender equality and the achievement of women’s rights. **These issues can no longer be treated as a side topic in discussions on digitalization.** Building on the agreed language adopted during the sixty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women and in the 2030 Agenda, the paper recommends two lines of action to adopt a gender-transformative framework for digital cooperation:

- A **stand-alone goal** to ensure that the Global Digital Compact will prioritize the advancement of women’s rights and capacities to enjoy a life free of violence, online and offline; to be free to choose an occupation in the digital age and equally benefit from technological advancements; and to make decisions on how digital transformation impacts their lives, communities, future generations, their countries and the planet.
- The **mainstreaming of gender in all themes of the Global Digital Compact**, grounded in an understanding that the structural causes of gender-based inequality in the digital world can be found and addressed everywhere.

Without attention to these issues, gender-based inequalities in power that block the realization of women’s rights are rendered invisible. The structural causes of gender-based discrimination and harm are left unchanged – and even amplified and perpetuated by digital tools.<sup>100</sup> The Global Digital Compact will shape the digital transformation of societies for years to come. It may become a breakthrough in galvanizing momentum to achieve the SDGs by offering a digital governance framework that guides global, regional and national approaches based on shared principles, priorities and objectives. Placing gender at the heart of the compact will guarantee that we do not miss a once-in-a-generation opportunity to influence a groundbreaking framework to advance women’s and girls’ rights and empowerment.

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<sup>100</sup> L. Nicoletti and D. Bass. n.d. “[Humans Are Biased. Generative AI Is Even Worse.](#)” Bloomberg. See this reference for examples of how Stable Diffusion’s text-to-image model amplifies stereotypes about race and gender and takes disparities to a level worse than those found in the real world.

The transformation of digital cooperation demands shared responsibility and aligned efforts across diverse stakeholders. The success of the Global Digital Compact will be measured by its capacity to unlock targeted investments in bridging digital divides and establishing digital governance mechanisms that shape a more equal digital future for all. UN-Women and the members of the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality commit to working together and with all stakeholders to support the negotiations on the Global Digital Compact and to generate commitments and actions to implement our common vision.



The opening of the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women.  
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