

# Background paper: Digital Education & the Future of Women's Work: Promoting female leadership by bridging the digital gender skills gap

*IGF sub-theme: Connecting All People and Safeguarding Human Rights*

## Abstract

Women, especially those in the global south, are predominantly affected by the impact of digital transformation, yet they are still underrepresented and structurally disadvantaged in STEM-related professions. While the pandemic has exacerbated this issue, technological disruption in many industries also provides an opportunity to accelerate women's economic empowerment by providing them with the future-proof skills they need to be leaders in a new digital era. Ensuring that women can equally benefit from opportunities provided by the internet across regions and sectors and on all hierarchical levels is a key component of the Internet Governance Forum's (IGF) theme "Connecting All People and Safeguarding Human Rights" because it fundamentally relates to the problem of meaningful access. In this context, this panel aims to involve the global IGF community in the discourse on the importance of bridging the digital skills divide for women and a female future of work, while providing concrete policy recommendations for German feminist development policy.

## Introduction: The gender digital (skills) divide

What does it really mean to "leave no one behind"? In the age of German feminist foreign and development policy, providing meaningful access to the internet to all people is inextricably linked with providing women and girls worldwide with equal and safe opportunities online. Yet, digital inclusion is not a binary – just because women have access to the internet and basic digital skills does not mean they have the same opportunities as men. Quite the opposite is true in fact: structural disadvantages in the digital space prevail for women across all regions and sectors.

Women, especially those in the global south, are predominantly affected by the impact of digital transformation, yet they are still underrepresented in STEM<sup>1</sup>-related professions. The Global Gender Gap Report (2020), for example, outlined that of all people working in Mexico's tech-related industries, women made up only 11% of engineering roles, and 10% of experts in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI).<sup>2</sup> This gender gap can also be observed in political ICT-leadership which remains equally male-dominated. For example, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), only 13% of 193 ITU members had female digital ministers in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while it is clear that structural change at the policy level is needed to upend the situation of women in the digital and tech space, a lack of female representation and visibility further hinders a gender-responsive global digital transformation.

On top of that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more women have lost their jobs relative to men while still covering the majority of unpaid care work, facing wage gaps and a deepening digital divide. While automation and technological disruption are fundamentally changing the world of work, the reskilling imperative that emerges as a result could offer powerful tools to promote gender diversity by providing access to decent, high value-added jobs. Yet, a United Nations report suggests that, compared to men, women and girls are 25% less likely to know how to use digital technologies for basic purposes, four times less likely to know how to program computers, and 13 times less likely to register a technology patent.<sup>4</sup> Instead of allowing digital disruptions to disadvantage women in the workplace, targeted reskilling could accelerate women's economic empowerment by providing them with the future-proof skills they need to be leaders in a new digital era.<sup>5</sup>

While efforts to close the digital gender gap are essential, the quality of women's inclusion - their visibility, power of voice and nature of jobs - should be assessed critically. Women have been fighting for centuries, yet today equality is still illusive and in some countries even on a reverse trajectory.<sup>6</sup> This is why it is crucial to reflect on the realities of women in tech while especially focusing on their

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<sup>1</sup> Science, Engineering and Technology (STEM)

<sup>2</sup> [Global Gender Gap Report 2020 | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2020)

<sup>3</sup> [Advancing the implementation of the WRC-19 Declaration on Gender - ITU Hub](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Policy/WRC-19/Declarations/2019/Declarations/2019_Declaration_on_Gender/Pages/2019_Declaration_on_Gender.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> [I'd Blush If I Could \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/news/1d-blush-if-i-could)

<sup>5</sup> [Why we need to reskill women for future of work | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org/reports/why-we-need-to-reskill-women-for-future-of-work)

<sup>6</sup> [Global Gender Gap Report 2021 | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021)

experiences in the global south, and to discuss the necessary policies and changes to improve this situation.

Ensuring that women can equally benefit from opportunities provided by the internet across regions and sectors and on all hierarchical levels is a key component of the Internet Governance Forum's (IGF) theme "Connecting All People and Safeguarding Human Rights" because it fundamentally relates to the problem of meaningful access. As a policy issue, the question of how the structural disadvantages that women are facing in high-level and leadership positions can only be adequately addressed in a multi-stakeholder format.

### **Empowering women in tech globally**

German feminist development policy aims to address the issue of promoting female labour participation and leadership in the digital realm in cooperation with partner countries in the global south. While the lack of employment and leadership opportunities for women stems from missing digital skills, this partnership recognizes that the digital divide is also an issue of rights, resources and representation of women in the digital realm. As such, this internet governance theme can only be addressed in a joint effort. This includes measures that increase women's visibility as leaders in the digital ecosystem, allocate resources to bridging the high-skill digital divide and provide opportunities for women to leverage their skills for their own development and their communities. Lastly, these measures should protect women by strengthening their rights to an education and a workplace free of discrimination.

This IGF session will bring together a diverse global multi-stakeholder panel to discuss the role of digital skills for a female future of work by looking at how women can be elevated in tech leadership and high value-added jobs. In a 60-minute panel discussion and open question round, it will address three key policy questions:

1. What role does women's participation in high-level skills jobs and leadership roles play for digital gender equality in the context of fair internet governance?
2. How can digital skill development be leveraged to ensure women's access to decent, high-value-added jobs and leadership positions?
3. What policies are necessary to enable women's participation in high value-added digital jobs and leadership positions?

### **The way forward**

This panel aims to involve the global IGF community in the discourse on the importance of bridging the digital skills divide for women and a female future of work. It will do so by bringing together a diverse, inter-regional and multi-stakeholder group of experts discussing the topic on the basis of different country experiences. As a result, the discussion is expected to derive concrete policy recommendations for German development cooperation and its partner countries. The outcomes of the session will also inform the work of the global network of digital political initiatives implemented by the Digital Transformation Centers and GIZ's global project 'Future of Work'. Most importantly, the session aims to promote a discussion with the IGF audience on the opportunities and limitations of pursuing a feminist development policy in the digital realm and ways to promote a female future of work.