

The International Girls in ICT (GICT) Day is an initiative backed by all International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Member States in ITU Plenipotentiary Resolution 70 (Rev. Busan, 2014). It aims to create a global environment that empowers and encourages girls and young women to consider careers in the growing field of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). This in turn enables both the girls and technology companies to reap the benefits of greater female participation in the ICT sector.

As a member state, Zambia has, through the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), offers girls from rural and peri-urban parts of the nation an opportunity to embrace technologies by having them participate in hands-on ICT creation workshops, engaging plenary sessions and career talks on ICTs led by industry experts. The Authority has also established a Gender and ICT portfolio as a way of enhancing the domestication of the ITU Resolution to address the gender digital divide.

Every last Thursday of the month of April, Zambia joins the rest of the world in celebrating the Anniversary of the International Girls in ICT Day

1. Situation Analysis

Over the years, Girls in ICT Day has been celebrated in more than 170 countries with over 11,000 events worldwide by engaging key stakeholders and partners to inspire girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers through trainings, information sharing, capacity building activities and role models. Adolescent girls with job-specific skills related to STEM – such as Engineering, Computer Programming, Cloud Technology, Robotics, Health Sciences and Technologies – are better equipped to equally and actively participate in changing economies and evolving labour markets. Currently, traditional employment sectors are declining in response to automation, while innovation opens new ones demanding different skills. Without STEM skills – critical thinking, problem-solving and digital skills– girls and women will be further left behind from equal economic and social participation.

In 2016, Zambia ranked 139th out of 188 countries in its Gender Inequality Index of 0.526 thus putting her in the bottom 21% on the gender equality ladder. Therefore, despite the proliferation of the use of ICTs in Zambia, there remains a persistent gender gap in the access and utilisation of technology and an absence of digital literacy among girls and women.

Further, ZICTA, which has an established Gender and ICT portfolio in its framework, was identified as an implementing Agency under the Government of the Republic of Zambia-United Nations (GRZ-UN) Joint Programme on Gender Based Violence (GBV) - Phase II, through Ministry of Gender for the purpose of it raising awareness and helping change the state of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) in Zambia.

ZICTA's role under this Joint Programme also includes promoting economic empowerment for women and girls through ICTs. Funded by the Swedish and Irish Governments, the main development challenge that the Programme seeks to address is the persistent gender gaps in many spheres of the Zambian society. These gaps are negatively affecting the country's development trajectory, amidst growing global recognition of gender equality as a core development objective in its own right. Despite the country having scored progress in

promoting gender equality with specific gender equality laws and policies, gender inequalities are still persistent.

In line with the Zambia Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goal number 5 and the objectives of the GRZ-UN Joint Programme Phase II, ZICTA endeavours to celebrate the Girls in ICT Day to help bridge the gender-digital divide by enhancing their ICT skills and encouraging girls and young women to resiliently leverage on ICTs.

For a decade, Girls in ICT has been celebrated around the world with the bold leadership of the ITU member states. Zambia has been committed to contributing to the annual commemorations by organising programmes, trainings, and activities and working with strategic partners such as the Ministry of Gender through the GRZ_UN Joint Programme on GBV Phase II, Financial Sector Deepening Zambia (FSDZ), Asikana Network, She Entrepreneur and other strategic stakeholders to maximize impact and reach.

Over the years, this day has been celebrated in different parts of the country, however last year, the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) saw the commemoration go virtual while in some special instances, a limited number of participants were hosted in adherence to the necessary social distancing directives. ZICTA therefore deployed all forms of technology such as television, radio and online platforms to take advantage of the digital space to ensure a wider reach.

However, as the lockdowns and school closures of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown us, the global digital divide has limited or prevented learning opportunities for two-thirds of the world's children. These children, 'our target market' are without internet access at home and are missing crucial learning opportunities related to STEM.

Gender-disaggregated data as shown in the 2018 National ICT Survey, shows us that females have been left even further behind in this context than boys. Where we find extreme poverty, economic vulnerability, and crisis is where we find the highest gender disparities in education.

While many girls have been able continue with their education because schools gates have re-opened, there is a greater learning gap to cover. It is for this reason that Zambia is committed to supporting and expanding the Girls in ICT programme.

Now, more than ever before, we must inspire girls to see a brighter future through STEM education. Through online access, skills education and digital tools training, they can equip themselves with the necessary skills to think laterally, solve problems and innovate. In an age that is shaped by technological advances, having the know-how to operate, use and create technology and science-based solutions is critical to the advancement of young people and crucial for girls' and women's health, education, voice and empowerment.