

Statement on Gender in the WSIS+20 Review Process

March 31, 2025

As we approach the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the signatory organisations acknowledge the progress made so far in recognising gender as a cross-cutting issue in digital development. However, we consider that stronger and more explicit commitments to gender equality are needed in the WSIS framework to ensure truly inclusive digital transformation in order to benefit societies as a whole.

With emerging and advancing information technologies - including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and extended reality - reshaping our economies, governance structures, and social interactions, integrating gender lens into the WSIS framework is not only a matter of human rights but an economic, social, and developmental imperative. Failing to establish an adequate foundation for gender equity at this critical juncture, we risk embedding and amplifying existing inequalities in the digital architectures that will govern our digital future.

The economic case for gender inclusion in digital development is compelling. As noted in our submission to the ITU Council, "closing the gender gap in tech governance could add \$1 trillion to the global economy." Women represent half of the world's talent pool, and their exclusion from digital economies represents a massive inefficiency in resource allocation. In addition, as technologies like AI increasingly become the backbone of decision-making systems across sectors, the underrepresentation of women in their development leads to products and services that inadequately meet the needs of half the population—further reinforcing market inefficiencies.

Beyond economic arguments, gender inclusion in digital governance is essential for achieving intersectional justice. The digital divide does not affect all women equally; it intersects with other forms of marginalisation based on race, geography, socioeconomic status, age, disability, and other factors. A robust gender-focused framework within WSIS would create space to address these overlapping inequalities, ensuring digital technologies serve as tools for empowerment rather than instruments that deepen exclusion. As emerging digital developments increasingly mediate access to essential services, from healthcare and education to financial inclusion and civic participation, their gender-responsive design becomes indispensable for social progress at large.

We recognize the progress achieved. Particularly, we welcome the incorporation of gender in the [CSTD Background Paper for WSIS+20](#), including the acknowledgement that gender digital divides remain a fundamental concern and that digital inequality can exacerbate social and economic inequalities. The report rightly notes that "women were reported in 2024 to make up only around 30 per cent of all STEM workers and of those working on AI, to comprise less than 20 per cent of graduates from doctoral programmes on AI, and less than 15 percent of authors of AI research papers." Recognising persistent gender gaps in the technology sector is crucial for developing appropriate policy responses.

The report also highlights important initiatives like the EQUALS Global Partnership (established by ITU and UNWOMEN in 2014), the Broadband Commission working groups, and the Global Digital Compact's commitments to "mainstream a gender perspective in digital connectivity strategies." We commend these efforts and the attention paid to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, which the report acknowledges has "grown recently with the advent of generative AI."

Despite this progress, we believe the current approach to gender in the WSIS framework remains insufficient. As highlighted in our submission to the ITU Council, gender is currently "covered by the WSIS Action Lines, but not as a standalone action line." Instead, it is meant to be "integrated into all WSIS Action Lines," yet there is limited evidence of systematic gender mainstreaming across these actions.

The persistence of stark gender digital divides demonstrates how the current approach is not delivering the needed outcomes, as reported in the mentioned documents:

- **Access and meaningful connectivity disparities persist, along with gaps in digital skills and literacy:** Women are 15% less likely than men to own mobile phones in lower- and middle-income countries; the gap is wider in low-income countries and LDCs. Women also remain underrepresented in STEM education and digital skill development programmes.
- **Online representation and security:** Women face disproportionate levels of online harassment, threats, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
- **Decision-making and leadership:** Women are significantly underrepresented in digital governance, making up less than 20% of digital and AI government advisory boards.
- **Gender-responsive policy development:** Many WSIS-aligned national ICT policies lack specific gender strategies, reflecting a critical governance gap.

As organisations dedicated to advancing gender equality in digital spaces, we call for the following concrete measures in the WSIS+20 review:

1. Establish a standalone WSIS Action Line on Gender

We endorse the recommendation in the ITU Council Gender Submission that "the WSIS+20 Review should adopt a specific/standalone action line on gender." This would allow for "the articulation and coordination of measures to promote better monitoring, data generation, accountability measures and financing mechanisms to respond to gender-specific challenges relating to digital technologies." A dedicated Action Line would provide a clearly defined framework for addressing gender inequality in digital development, with specific goals, measurable targets, and dedicated resources.

2. Establish Obligations on Access to Data

As part of promoting access to information and data through the observance of the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI), we support the ITU Council's recommendation through the EQUALS Global Partnership, via its EQUALS Research Coalition, should recognise the crucial role played by industry actors who manage very large online platforms (VLOPs) and very large online search engines (VLOSEs). Their contributions are vital for ensuring equitable access to information, data, and the essential resources like statistics, datasets, and research findings, which are fundamental for fostering a just, enlightened, and inclusive society in our digital age. By leveraging the potential of data, especially in this era, we can enhance democracy and uphold various human rights while promoting transparency and accountability in governance.

3. Establish gender-specific indicators and targets

We support the recommendation to "establish gender-specific indicators in WSIS reporting frameworks and require governments to report on gender progress in ICT policies during WSIS follow-ups." Without robust measurement frameworks and accountability mechanisms, gender commitments risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

4. Mandate gender impact assessments

The WSIS framework should "mandate gender impact assessments in ICT policymaking" and require them for AI and emerging technologies before their deployment. This would help prevent the perpetuation and amplification of existing gender biases.

5. Increase women's representation

We call for concrete targets to "increase women's representation in WSIS-related governance and decision-making bodies." As noted in the ITU Council Gender Submission, women hold only 26% of leadership roles in global cybersecurity and tech policy, and only 15% of authors of influential AI research papers are women.

6. Establish dedicated funding streams

The WSIS framework should include "dedicated WSIS funding streams for gender-inclusive ICT programmes" to ensure that initiatives addressing gender inequality have adequate resources.

7. Adopt a comprehensive approach to technology facilitated gender-based violence

The WSIS framework should "develop global guidelines under WSIS to combat online gender-based violence" and encourage "national cybersecurity policies to include gender-sensitive protections." Recognizing TFGBV as a manifestation of underlying structural issues is important to note, that - as has been stated by International law - frameworks that address this issue need to be part of a broader multifaceted strategy that also involves non-legal measures aimed at removing systemic and structural barriers to gender equality.

The digital revolution presents immense opportunities for advancing gender equality, but it equally risks reinforcing and deepening existing inequalities if gender considerations are not explicitly prioritised. As stated in the ITU Council Gender Submission: "Digital policies that ignore gender perspectives can lead to inadequate protections; evidence shows that policies governing online safety, privacy, and harassment often fail to address gendered threats like doxxing or deepfake abuse."

We urge negotiators and Member States to seize the opportunity presented by the WSIS+20 review to address these gaps by creating a standalone Action Line on gender and ensuring that gender equality is positioned as a central, non-negotiable element of the information society, not merely a cross-cutting issue that risks being inadequately addressed. We strongly invite you to reach out to our members to collaborate with further input and expertise to inform upcoming decisions and implement the actions we hereby recommend, and to ensure the incorporation of civil society voices and updated priorities in every stage of this review process.

Only through concrete measures such as these can we ensure digital transformation leaves no one behind and contributes meaningfully to gender equality rather than reinforcing existing disparities.

Alliance for Universal Digital Rights

Association for Progressive Communications - APC

Derechos Digitales

Equality Now

Pollicy

Women At The Table