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“Gender Transformative Policy to Advance Digital Inclusion”
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Good Morning,

Let me begin by saying that digitalising our society has consequences, one of which is the role of big tech in changing all our operating systems and models. The large tech companies are dominant all along the digital value chain in critical areas such as search, streaming, digital advertising, App Stores, operating systems, social media, e-commerce, production of content, control and distribution of content, devices and influence over users. Amazon is dominant in supply chain and e-commerce; Apple is synonymous with lifestyle; Google is so powerful that it is a verb; Facebook is the largest community in the world with over a third of humanity; Microsoft is second only to Amazon in cloud computing, leads in desktop operating systems and with its controlling interest in Open AI, has become a leader in the field of Artificial General Intelligence; and Netflix describes itself as “the Internet TV network for the Globe”.

It does not take much contemplation to discern the tension between that technological ecosystem and gender, which in the words of Bridget Brennan, “is the most powerful determinant of how a person views the world and everything in it.”

This means that if we are not intentional in prioritising gendered perspectives in tech policy, the design and governance of society will be sub-optimal.

We must therefore elevate, as a special factor, and with a high degree of particularity, the issues which affect women and girls in the digital economy and society, both in respect of challenges and opportunities.

A number of issues come to mind. Bias against women and girls in large language models; objectification of women, stereotypical portrayals - one consequence of which are unrealistic expectations of the bodies of women and girls, influenced in large measure by unfiltered pornography. Other examples are cyber stalking and the toxic content that is targeted at vulnerable girls, resulting in a range of psycho-social and health issues. In other words, we have to make safety the handmaiden of digital inclusion.

Prioritizing gender concerns in digital policy also makes economic sense. A 2019 Forbes article reported that Women accounted for 80% of consumer spend globally, whether as the main purchaser or influencer. But the picture is disproportionately different when we look at strategic leadership in the digital space. To be fair, in January 2024, Apple became the first big tech company with a gender-equal board of directors but that is inconsistent with the demographic makeup throughout the digital ecosystem.

Why does this matter? The theory of harm is that too few women at the strategic level makes for bad digital policy and the whole of society suffers when there is no gender mainstreaming.

For these reasons, big tech needs to be regulated. At minimum, mandated gender audits are necessary and needed now.

But, let us be realistic. The mega digital platforms are not only too big to control but it is also not obvious how to regulate them effectively.

This is why the empowerment of women and girls through Digital, Media and Information Literacy needs to be a key element of every country's digital strategy. Digitally literate women and girls form the best and most formidable first line of defence against digital obstacles and dysfunctionalities.

I am pleased to note that the UNESCO IFAP Working Group on Information Accessibility has proposed a Policy Brief on "Information Accessibility and Transparency" which cites as global good practice, the African Union's Strategy for Gender Equality and Empowerment (2018-2028) which explicitly calls for action to ensure women and girls are active within the 'technological space and that gender enabling E- solutions are funded'. Similarly, the UK's International women and girls strategy 2023 to 2030 highlights and seeks to address affordable connectivity and digital literacy for women.

As the WGIA's draft policy brief states, "A healthy information ecosystem is transparent, trustworthy, inclusive, and among other characteristics, requires the efforts of private and public sector entities as well the participation of well-informed users." Without the full engagement of women and girls that ideal would obviously be incomplete.

Thank You