COMBATTING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

Promoting Equal Access to Technology for Women and Girls

ZOE LEVINE
TUMUN IX

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Letter From the GA President,

Dear Delegates,

My name is Zoe Levine, and I am honored to be the President of the General Assembly for this year's Tufts Model United Nations Conference. I am a first-year student at Tufts studying International Relations, and I am from Verona, NJ. Through doing Model UN over the past five years, I have gained a strong sense of community when attending conferences, developing committee strategies, and sharing expertise with fellow MUN members! I am excited by the prospect of facilitating this experience for high school students, and I am elated to begin this committee of the Commission on the Status of Women: Combatting the Gender Digital Divide!

For the past two years, I have served as a Youth Delegate to the Commission on the Status of Women, CSW67 and CSW68, and have found it to be a sincerely positive, collaborative, and hopeful environment. Pure enthusiasm emanates from every national delegation and NGO representative in attendance to learn about the resources, priorities, and perspectives of others when working toward shared goals. That is the culture I would like to replicate within this committee. Nations engage with this conference with the intention of uplifting governments, economies, and societies through the empowerment of women and girls in various respects. Delegates should be mindful that while strategies and approaches to the problems you are presented with may differ, no position within this committee is fundamentally against that premise (which your discourse should reflect).

Addressing the gender digital divide is imperative for cultivating greater global gender equity in all spheres of life and improving the success and prosperity of communities everywhere. Both topics in this committee tackle key challenges to closing the gender digital divide and achieving equal access and use of technology by women and girls. Topic A of this committee is improving equal access to digital literacy education and technological infrastructure, and Topic B is creating safe digital spaces and policies to protect the data of women and girls.

If you have any questions or concerns prior to when we open debate in March, please feel free to contact me at Zoe.Levine@tufts.edu. I look forward to meeting you all!

Sincerely,
Zoe Levine

Procedure and Technology Policy:

This committee will operate under traditional parliamentary procedure. Delegates will be allowed to use technological devices, such as laptops and tablets, outside of the committee room and during unmoderated caucuses to draft Working Papers and Draft Resolutions. It is recommended delegates come to committee sessions prepared with printed/handwritten notes, as all devices should be turned off during Moderated Caucuses out of respect and attentiveness to those speaking.

Position Papers:

To be eligible to win an award, every delegate will be responsible for writing a 1-page position paper in response to each topic outlined in the background guide. Each position paper should include a background on the topic, an overview of your country's position, and your proposed solutions for addressing the key questions outlined in the background guide. One position paper for Topic A and one position paper for Topic B should be emailed to Zoe.Levine@tufts.edu on or before March 1st.

What is the Digital Divide?

Every day, we use a variety of technological devices to correspond with others via messaging services, view media like news, music, and television, employ mobile banking applications, reference online education resources like Google Classroom and Canvas, and creatively express ourselves through social media forums. These functions are integral to our capacity for learning and interacting with the world around us and have become fundamental for prosperity in the modern age. The median gender parity ratio of internet usage is a startling 71, meaning for every 100 men using the internet there are only 71 women with the same privilege [1]. Additionally, the ITU reports over 50% of women globally are offline. When women are connected, they access the internet less frequently, use a smaller range of digital services, and use digital services less intensely than men [13]. Adolescent girls and young women have less access to and make less use of the internet and digital technologies when compared to men of the same age [1]. The disparity between genders in access to and use of digital technologies is now known as the digital divide, and it has extensive consequences for gender equity in all spheres of life.

Why Addressing the Digital Divide is Important?

Connection to the internet and digital skills are necessary to access vital health information and resources [1]. Functions like telehealth, which have become increasingly offered by physicians and utilized by patients since the emergence of COVID-19, provide healthcare opportunities at less cost and risk, greater quality, and increased ease. Access to telehealth physicians benefits the care of those suffering from chronic illnesses, provides geographic areas with few mental health or specialty care professionals with more equitable medical care opportunities, and substantially reduces unnecessary trips to the emergency room (which are 12 times as expensive as a visit to a physician, entail longer waits, and increase exposure to pathogens) [4]. Mobile phone ownership also allows women and girls to be more knowledgeable about sexual and reproductive health, and there is a correlation between increased national mobile phone ownership and higher uptake of contraceptives [16]. When women and girls engage in more informed decision-

making, they exercise a greater extent of agency over their present lives and futures.

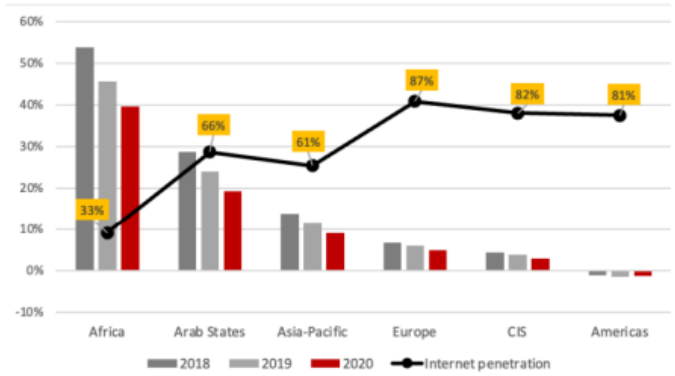
Internet access and digital skills are also important for civic engagement, social connection, and the expression of ideas and opinions [1]. Digital adoption can empower women and girls by raising awareness of their rights, which gives them a heightened ability to understand and act when those rights are being infringed upon [13]. Online platforms allow women and girls to access news from a broader diversity of sources and become more accurately informed about what is happening in their communities and the wider world [16]. This allows them to project their voices on political matters, and it provides them with various forums for communicating their interests or needs to elected officials. Online platforms can also serve as a means of mobilizing for policy preferences, so that the issues faced by, and the ideas of women and girls can be heard and acknowledged. Online platforms allow creativity to blossom, serving as a medium for women and girls to influence social and intellectual culture, and pursue art or literature. Social media applications function as a mechanism for generating and sustaining interpersonal connections, which benefits the social and emotional well-being of women and girls.

The internet is also a means of accessing educational resources; learning can be done through a plethora of applications - formally and informally. Formal learning is more intentional, organized, planned, and guided. Examples of technology-facilitated formal learning opportunities include online classes and tutoring services that provide instruction for students to become proficient in a specific subject. Informal learning is less structured and more casual. It includes non-deliberate exposure to information when browsing online media platforms [18]. Technology also improves how meaningful in-person education opportunities are. Girls in school can use mobile phones to contact educators and fellow students with inquiries related to class content. This allows them to follow up on missed lessons, further interact with material, gain a more comprehensive understanding of content, and pursue their curiosities and interests [16].

It is estimated that 90% of jobs globally have a digital component, making access to technology fundamental for women and girls to procure work, participate in economic activities, and enjoy economic independence [1]. Women can also use mobile phones to find jobs independently, promoting greater agency

over types and places of work [16]. Women who use online platforms to take up ‘gig’ domestic work (short-term, project-based employment opportunities that center around household tasks and responsibilities) often use the opportunity to move from rural to urban areas, become employed for the first time, and find work outside of slums [8][19]. Online applications allow rural women to coordinate and connect with markets to sell products without intermediaries. With this resource, they possess a greater degree of determinism over their business practices and do not have to forfeit profits to a third party. Internet connectivity enables women and girls to access funding and financial services necessary to operate and expand their independent business ventures [12]. [16]

While the digital divide refers to the divide in access to and meaningful use of technology based on gender, it also describes the physical divide between places with differing extents of technological access/use and gender equity. When developing plans of action in this committee, it should be noted that women with low levels of education living in rural areas are the least likely to be “connected” [12]. General education is a primary indicator of mobile phone ownership, above socioeconomic status and rural or urban living, for numerous nations in regions most affected by the digital divide [16]. The region with the largest gender gap in internet use is South Asia, and the regions with the lowest internet use for male and female youth are Eastern and Southern Africa [1]. Although women in urban areas on average face no difference in the probability of mobile phone ownership in comparison to men, rural and urban women alike both face lower rates of internet use [9].



[9] *Gender gap in Internet use by region*

Topic A: **Access to Information, Communication Technology, and Internet Connection**

Digital technologies are all electronic tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, or process data [13]. Complete access to information and communication technology encompasses the hardware of physical devices, stable wireless connection, and the ability to afford the software and services for their internet connection and full capacity of use [9]. Examples of mobile devices include mobile phones, smartphones, laptops, and tablets. Examples of digitized analog media include television, radio, cameras, and game devices. Examples of online applications include email, social networking sites, search engines, e-commerce, and e-banking [20].

Mobile phones are the primary means by which men and women in low and middle-income countries access the internet. Globally, 143 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone, and 393 million adult women in developing countries do not own mobile phones [9]. Women are less likely than men to be the primary owners of mobile devices and are more likely than men to borrow or share mobile phones. Women also face greater limitations on use than men because of access to less expensive and sophisticated technology, on average [13]. The global gender gap in smartphone ownership has increased 2% since 2020, justifying the necessity for immediate and comprehensive interventions to lessen the current gender gap in smartphone ownership of 18% [9].

Region	Women's Internet Use	Men's Internet Use	*Use Gap countries average (women's reference)* (2)
North America	94%	95%	*1%*
Latin America	60%	64%	*12%*
Europe	77%	81%	*5%*
Middle-East and North Africa	77%	79%	*9%*
Sub-Saharan Africa	28%	38%	*43%*
Central Asia	57%	64%	*15%*
East Asia	83%	86%	*2%*
SouthEast Asia-Pacific	60%	67%	*11%*
South Asia	18%	37%	*137%*

In 2021 global internet penetration reached 63%, but only 37% of youth aged 15-24 have internet access in the home [1]. In regions where there is a higher level of internet adoption (including coverage and quality), the gender gap of internet use is generally lower [9]. A contribution to this reality is the higher cost of networks in areas of low connectivity, which disproportionately affect women and girls. Women consistently earn less and are less financially independent than men due to numerous factors limiting their wage-earning potential, including the prevalence of the gender wage gap. Accordingly, the expansion of internet access could promote

greater use by women and girls, as they are more technologically disadvantaged than their male counterparts when there is lesser regional connectivity in general. Women and girls having less disposable income also results in them being able to spend less on mobile and internet services when they are connected, further restricting the extent of their use [13].

There is a discrepancy in digital products and services uniquely designed for women and girls. Women are less represented in STEM fields; they make up less than a third of professionals in the technology sector [23]. The disproportionate influence of men in the design of products, services, and digital content means the perspectives and interests of women are not adequately reflected in what is available on the market [13]. When online spaces cater less to women, they are less engaging and support fewer personal, social, and professional benefits. Consequently, women are less incentivized to learn their features, frequent those spaces, and get less advantage from time spent online than men. Women and girls are also less aware of the existence and benefits of the mobile internet and the value of storing mobile money [16]. This could contribute to the lack of desire to seek ownership of technological devices.

Digital Literacy Education:

UNESCO has promoted and modeled approaches to media education and employs the broad title of "Media and Information Literacy." Being media literate now implies having the ability to exercise the diverse competencies (including personal, technological, and intellectual skills) needed to play, learn, and work, in a digital environment [2]. Digital skills encompass the knowledge necessary to navigate the internet and synthesize and adapt information from online applications [1]. Digital skills are not only technical but also content dependent [20]. This means education and practice must be continually ongoing, and users must constantly acquire new skills to maintain the same quality of use as online spaces evolve and adapt.

While facilitating the equitable distribution of physical resources is critical for lessening the gender disparity in access to technological devices, the share of youth with the digital skills that make those devices safe and meaningful assets is less than the share of youth with internet access in the home [1]. Men are over twice as likely to possess digital skills compared to women, and the digital skills men possess are particularly higher for tasks requiring more

advanced or specialized knowledge [7]. This renders equitable digital literacy education a critical endeavor in facilitating the equitable use of technological devices, access to the internet, and inclusive socio-economic participation of women and girls [1].

Digital literacy closely mimics traditional literacy (reading and writing) in many ways, but it requires its own special skill set to source and identify information [20]. To empower women and girls with the ability to participate equally and productively in online spaces, teaching digital competency must accompany equal education opportunities in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills [1].

Digital inequality is both a consequence and cause of broader inequalities [23]. Gender norms, biases, and stereotypes are embedded in curricula, learning materials (such as textbooks), and teaching [21]. When combating the divide in digital literacy, it is essential for schools to adopt curricula that account for context-specific barriers to equal digital literacy education [1]. This entails considering the intersectionality (unique combination of cultural, religious, race, sexuality, class, and other identities possessed by a group of people) of populations to target the unique power relationships held within a society that contribute to obstacles faced when striving to achieve gender equality [3][9]. This poses a challenge to implementing programs on a substantial scale and preserving a consistent extent of their impact.

Digital literacy is also developed from time spent becoming familiar with online platforms, which require regular use [13]. In addition to learning digital skills through educational programming, women and girls must also have safe and reliable places to practice and exercise new knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that while equal educational opportunities play a role in lessening the gap in digital skills, households perpetuating gender norms and biases favoring adolescent boys and young men have considerable influence over the digital skills learned and exercised by adolescent girls and young women [1]. Various contributors accompanying the female identity, such as the unpaid burden of care and male violence against women, also limit their ability to learn and practice digital skills and make use of available technology [9]. Women have a greater responsibility for unpaid work like childcare, cooking, cleaning, and farming, and spend 2.3 more hours on average than men on unpaid care

work per day, restricting their time spent online [26].

Pushback in certain communities on the expansion of internet connectivity, particularly for women, can often stem from fears of disrupting an existing traditional social order that emphasizes the subordination of women and restriction of their public and professional lives. One example of this is the hundreds of rural communities in northern India that have banned women's mobile phone use and others that have declared mobile phone use "immoral" for women [10]. An under-investment in digital skills for women stems from perceptions of them being unnecessary for women's roles as household caretakers [16]. Dialogue in this committee should consider how a variety of local-level policies, and the perceptions and attitudes they encourage from community members toward the use of technology and the digital ecosystem by women, can challenge progress in achieving gender digital equity.

Topic A: Key Questions

1. What programs can be designed that expand internet connectivity and ICT device access (especially mobile phones) in rural areas to promote increased access and use by women and girls?
2. How can the effects of the expense of data, software, and internet services be mitigated so it does not impede the ability of women and girls to use the internet as meaningfully as men?
3. How can we increase the influence of women and girls (such as their equal representation in STEM fields) in the design of digital products, services, and content so they receive equal benefits from time spent online?
4. If digital competencies and literacy are of such importance within global societies, how can women and girls acquire them comparably to men through strategic education initiatives that accompany equal education opportunities in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills?
5. How can digital literacy education opportunities for women and girls be facilitated at a substantial enough scale to make a global impact while also considering regional context-specific barriers?
6. How can we improve access to safe and reliable places for women and girls to practice online skills?

7. How can we challenge existing social norms and biases that contribute to the lesser emphasis on digital knowledge and use among women and girls and their higher burden of unpaid work keeping them from exercising digital skills?

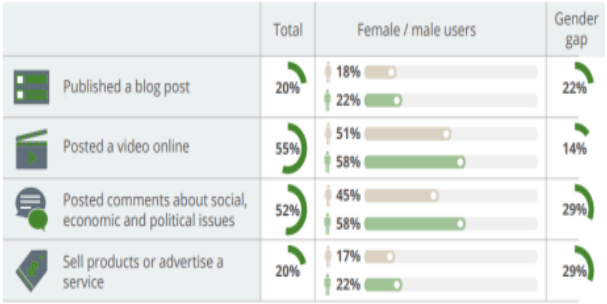
Topic B: **Regulation of Online Spaces**

Even when women and girls have access to technological devices and the skills to utilize them, participating in online spaces poses various risks to their psychological well-being and physical safety. This discourages them from using resources and platforms to the same extent as men, experiencing the same opportunities, and exercising the same freedom of expression [23].

Violence against women and girls now has no limits or geographical boundaries and can transpire anywhere with a connection to the internet [31]. Online gender-based violence is a substantial and growing trend, and it includes any act of violence that is committed, aggravated, or amplified in part or fully by information and communication technology or digital media based on gender [23]. Women are 27 times more likely to face harassment online than men, and one in ten women have experienced cyber violence since the age of 15. This includes incidents of cyberstalking (sending repeated unwanted messages to a victim) and cyber harassment (sending unwanted explicit messages, threats of violence, or hate speech) [29]. In 74 countries, law enforcement and courts are not taking appropriate action when web-enabled ICTs are used to commit acts of gender-based violence [32]. Every country has different definitions and punishments for cyber violence, and there are widely varying policies to address its presence in online spaces [29].

Women are likely to self-censor to avoid technology-facilitated gender-based violence, which leads to the silencing of their voices [31]. This can reduce their willingness to engage in in-person discourse because of the negative ramifications it has for their confidence and self-esteem [13]. This has numerous consequences, including that men are 29% more likely to make online content than women, 29% more likely to post comments about political, social, and economic issues, 29% more likely to sell products or advertise a service, and 22% more likely to publish a blog post [11]. This contributes to a disparity in relevant content for women, meaning they are less incentivized to learn the digital

skills necessary to use digital technology meaningfully, contributing to a harmful cycle of ever-increasing inequity in use [23]. This justifies the need for international, comprehensive regulations that prevent harmful, discouraging digital acts of violence against women from transpiring.

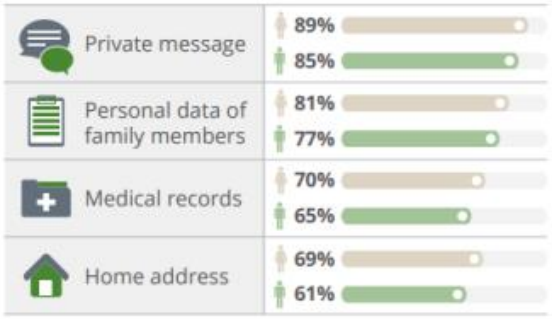


[23] Content generation for men and women internet users

Protecting the Data of Women and Girls:

The right to privacy is recognized in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [28]. This right is in violation when personal data is shared with individuals and audiences someone did not intend to share it with, or when it is used for purposes other than those they agreed to. Women experience greater concerns about threats to their private information, including private messages, home addresses, and healthcare information, in comparison to men [23]. Fifty-four percent of women say they would not allow companies to use any of their data which is a substantial 7% more than men [11]. Women's increased skepticism of companies using their data responsibly stems from fears of the potential harm they may endure if information is misused. Consequences of misuse of personal data include vulnerability to witnessing and experiencing online and in-person harassment and abuse. Women are more frequently impacted by serious privacy violations such as doxing, cyberstalking, the sharing of non-consensual images, and surveillance through devices [23]. Events of hacking and data breaches, where personal data is stolen, subject women to increased risk [30].

Table 5: Concerns about personal data privacy (%)



[23] Concerns about personal data privacy %

The lack of trust women has in tech companies can be largely attributed to the prevalent all-or-nothing approach to personal data use, limiting their degree of control over what information can and

cannot be stored [23]. The complexity of terms of service agreements fosters an inability of users to comprehensively review and understand the conditions of their use. The inefficiency induced by their length and complex use of language (particularly consequential for individuals with lower levels of literacy) is responsible for that experience. This produces ethical ambiguity surrounding which users can truly consent to the use of their information and what dangers they are exposed to if they are not knowledgeable of their heightened vulnerability.

This trust gap affects the willingness of women and girls to share data, and the resultant discrepancy in available consumer information has negative implications for the quality of products and services able to be designed for women. The gendered gap in available data is especially of concern when it comes to healthcare devices that collect data, such as smartwatches and wearable heart and blood glucose monitors, which can be used in healthcare provider evaluations and allow individuals to participate in large-scale research studies. The gap in data on women and girls exacerbates healthcare inequity, along with inequalities associated with many other industries [30].

Most health apps allow data to be shared or sold to third parties, and the sharing of sexual and reproductive health data threatens the ability of women and girls to receive necessary healthcare [30][23]. In countries with policy regulations on sexual and reproductive healthcare, the exposure of this data can jeopardize a woman's ability to receive and use services for fear of legal repercussions.

Topic B: Key Questions

1. How could universal regulations on online spaces be implemented to limit instances of cyber violence such as doxing, cyberstalking, the sharing of non-consensual images, and surveillance through devices?
2. What social programs could be instituted to encourage and empower the voices of women and girls online and in the real world?
3. In what ways could privacy policies establishing data usage rights in online spaces be regulated to protect the data of women and girls and their ability to consent to the storage and sharing of their information?

4. How can the trust gap be challenged so women and girls are willing to share data comparably to men?

Role of Covid-19 in Exacerbating Existing Inequity:

Following the onset of the Pandemic, a heightened risk accompanied in-person learning that compelled nations to alter existing education, social, and healthcare programs and infrastructure in the interest of limiting the spread of pathogens. With lesser overall access to in-person education, communication, and economic opportunities, the disadvantages experienced by women and girls intensified, making resolving the digital divide a more urgent undertaking.

Many nations implemented remote learning strategies which necessitated increased access to digital devices and varying levels of digital proficiency. The majority of youth in low and middle-income countries are not connected to the internet, have limited digital skills, do not own a mobile phone, and are most affected by the shift that transpired in means of learning [1]. UNESCO estimates that 11 million girls whose schooling was disrupted by the pandemic may never return to school [22]. One additional year of schooling for women results in a 12% increase in their wages, which is 2% more than the wage increases experienced by men in the same circumstance [15]. Accordingly, the missed learning caused by the shift in remote learning could have long-term, disproportionate consequences for the economic prosperity of women and girls.

Many of the jobs' women are more likely to perform, such as domestic care work, are the first to become unavailable in the event of a pandemic [16]. Women were disproportionately affected by the unemployment instigated by its circumstances and resultantly had less disposable income to spend on digital devices and online applications. Additionally, closures of schools and care facilities increased education and care responsibilities on parents, and most women assume primary childcare responsibilities within households [16]. This left less time for women and girls to utilize digital devices and engage with online spaces, to a lesser extent than what was experienced by men.

During the height of the pandemic when lockdowns and social-distancing protocols were implemented, incidents of gender-based violence in the home increased globally because of more lengthy periods of close proximity. This contributed to

increased verbal, sexual, and intellectual abuse online, which made online spaces less safe for women and girls and increased demand for regulation [12].

Current UN Policies and Programs:

There is an existing discrepancy in global research initiatives and data collection regarding the gender divide which inhibits nations from enacting technology policies and strategies to understand the extent and consequences of the problem and address it [23]. The 5th UN Sustainable Development Goal describes a need to empower women through access to ICTs [25]. At the Transforming Education Summit, UNESCO and UNICEF launched Gateways to Public Digital Learning as Action Track 4, a global, multi-partner initiative to support countries in securing equitable access to digital learning resources to advance the generation of evidence, data, and best practices to promote digital learning, and to promote norms and standards in this area [5][1]. UN Women launched Generation Equality in 2021, an initiative to boost investment and implementation of gender equality, and governments, civil society organizations, and private sector partners pledged to develop policies for the prevention of technology-facilitated gender-based violence by 2026 [34].

The Priority Theme of the 67th Commission on the status of women was innovation, technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and the Review Theme was challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. The digital divide was central to the dialogue of that conference, and intentions of resolving it comprised the outcome document of CSW67 known as the Agreed Conclusions. Within this committee, there is still substantial work to be done in articulating specific plans of action for addressing the problems and achieving the goals the Agreed Conclusions outlined that were reflected in this background guide.

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