[Title] PLACE AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN CYBERSPACE

[Subtitle] HOW TO SUPPORT THE PROCESS OF BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP IN IT

- Theme: The Internet We Want – Empowering All People
- Subtheme: Global Digital Divides & Inclusion
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Presentation

Around the world, millions of people still do not have access to the internet and cannot take advantage of its benefits, and women are equally excluded. Men worldwide are 21% more likely to use the internet than women, and in the least developed countries this percentage rises to 52%[1]. Various barriers prevent women and girls from accessing and participating online, including inequalities in education and digital skills, social norms that discourage women and girls from using the internet, and privacy and security concerns.

Therefore, there are two concepts around the world:

- **The digital divide,** which refers to the division of people into connected and unconnected. It can also refer to the divide between different user experiences (e.g. the digital divide between feature phones and smartphones) or different groups of people (e.g. the digital divide between cities and rural areas). It simply refers to the inequality of access and use of technology, and this applies to both women and men - all users.

- **The gender digital gap**, which refers to many of the same aspects of the digital divide but measured by gender. However, the focus on the 'gender gap' highlights that this digital inequality is just one aspect of a broader system of discrimination and deprivation that limits women's and girls' potential to participate in society.

The digital divide is a technological problem: the gender digital gap is a social problem.

Despite national and international public and private initiatives, a significant digital divide remains in terms of access to digital tools and skills. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies, 34% of the world's population, or 2.7 billion people, still do not have access to the internet - and 69% of men use it, compared to 63% of women[2].

Women and girls continue to be under-represented in all areas of digital technology, from programming and creation, to accessing services, to regulation and policy making. Moreover, the exclusion of women from the digital world has deprived low- and middle-income countries of up

[1]https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/the-gender-gap-in-internet-access-using-a-women-centred-method/ [access: 18.05.2023].
[2]https://www.itu.int/hub/2022/11/facts-and-figures-2022-global-connectivity-statistics/[access: 18.05.2023].

to $1 trillion in gross domestic product (GDP) over the past decade, and this loss could increase to $1.5 trillion by 2025 without action, the proposal comes from the UN Women Gender Snapshot 2022 report[3].

Women and girls often drop out of the digital sector due to the hostile environment. On average, women are paid 21% less than men, are promoted less often, and almost half experience harassment in the workplace. The global gender pay gap is 23%. Without decisive action, wage equalization will take another 68 years. Globally, women's participation in the labor market is 63% and men's 94%[4].

These statistics highlight the urgent need to change the online environment and expand internet access for women and girls.

So what barriers limit women's use of the internet?

- **Accessibility** - the cost of an internet connection prevents women from using the internet, and the price of mobile phones continues to be one of the main factors stated for why people in low- and middle-income nations do not use mobile phones to access the internet.
- **Pay gap** - the issue of the expense of internet connections for women is made worse by the gender pay discrepancy. According to a 2021 analysis of gadget prices in 187 nations, the cheapest new smartphone has an average price of $104 per unit. These costs are on average higher for women as a percentage of their income given the global gender pay gap, where women receive approximately 77 cents for every $1 a man earns. According to this ratio, a woman would need to work ten more days in order to afford the same smartphone that a guy could buy with one month's salary[5].
- **Lack of devices** - women possess fewer devices than males globally, in part because they are more expensive. For instance, it is thought that women are 15% less likely than males to own a smartphone in low- and middle-income nations. This has effects on how people who use mobile phones behave. For instance, 93% of smartphone users in a GSMA consumer survey of female mobile phone users in Nigeria utilize the internet, compared to only 12% of users of basic calling phones. Even while online, the lower percentage of female smartphone owners creates a technical barrier that limits what women may do[6].
- **Privacy and security -** in general, women are more worried about online security and privacy. Women are more likely to express concerns about personal data privacy while producing less online material in nations like Colombia, Ghana, and Uganda.
- **Education and skills -** women are also kept offline by disparities in educational attainment. One of the two main obstacles to using mobile internet is literacy, along with the price of mobile devices. The gender education gap in the world is still there (90% of adult men have a bachelor's degree or above compared to only 83% of adult women in 2019), and this imbalance is reproducing itself in the digital age. Less access to digital

[3]https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2023/03/press-release-international-womens-day-spotlights-massive-costs-to-gdp-and-innovation-caused-by-the-exclusion-of-women-from-the-digital-world [access: 18.05.2023].
[4] https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/the_gender_wage_gap_en.pdf [access: 18.05.2023].
[5] https://a4ai.org/news/how-expensive-is-a-smartphone-in-different-countries/ [access: 18.05.2023].
[6] https://www. gsma.com/r/gender-gap/ [access: 18.05.2023].

skills training in a classroom is another result of variations in typical school years. The educational disadvantages that girls face as a whole create a digital divide for women[7].

All of the financial, technical, security, and educational vulnerabilities listed above that women face individually combine to form a social norm that reinforces myths about women in cyberspace. These myths discourages women and girls from participating in the online world, denies the potential benefits of self-education, health or well-being, and hinders the potential cultural and economic benefits of greater inclusion of women and girls in the digital world.

Research shows that women are less likely than men to apply for IT jobs because they often feel they lack the necessary skills or that they will face discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, when women enter the IT workforce, they often face additional barriers such as a lack of mentoring and networking opportunities, limited access to professional development and training, and a lack of support for work-life balance. These challenges make it difficult for women to advance their careers and reach their full potential. To tackle these issues, we need a holistic approach that involves a range of stakeholders, including employers, educators, policy makers and individuals.

It is important that the framework emphasizes that a broadband strategy for an inclusive digital economy cannot only be about the infrastructure that enables access to the internet. This must be accompanied by a guarantee of women's and girls' rights, training for all, relevant local content and clear political objectives that ensure accountability in the political process. Governments and public organizations also need to do this.

In Poland, both state and private entities successfully join forces in this area. Here are just a few examples of our current initiatives:

Campaign *Girls for polytechnics!* and *Girls to Strict!* is a pioneering and at the same time the largest project promoting technical, engineering and science courses (STEM) among young women in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe. The most important goal of these programs is to break stereotypes in thinking and encourage secondary school students to take up technical and science studies. Science and technology need women. Especially now, when the culture of innovation is becoming more and more important and the world and Poland are heading in this direction. Innovation is necessary to build a knowledge-based society and economy geared towards global competitiveness. The participation of women in this process is one of the key conditions for its success. Graduates of technical and exact sciences must contribute to the creation of new solutions in the field of science and technology, because their potential and creativity are important for innovativeness of the country.

Going further, through education to mentoring, also supporting IT-women in the public sphere, the Polish Ministry of Digitization promotes women who are successful in cyberspace as part of the **#CyberStrong media campaign**, which tells about women who have achieved success in the IT industry and in managing the state's cybersphere.

Poland has also introduced **new regulations to the Labor Code**, guaranteeing parents and caretakers additional holidays and leaves, access to flexible forms of employment, including

[7] https://a4ai.org/report/the-costs-of-exclusion-economic-consequences-of-the-digital-gender-gap/ [access: 18.05.2023].

home-office, as well as extra protection from dismissal. Those incentives will protect women from new forms of on-line harassment and stalking, but also provide for a better work-life balance in harmonious couples and families. Providing access to the internet and digital devices that many women and girls are deprived of in some parts of the world remains a critical issue. Poland continues its efforts to provide full internet access and completely digitalized public services, as well as to eliminate the digital gap of the older and rural population.

An inescapable, very important aspect of life in Poland, but actually around the world, is the war in Ukraine, started by Russia's unjustified and unprovoked aggression against the independent country of Ukraine. It should be noted that before the war, the IT sector in Ukraine was characterized by an impressive growth rate of 25-30% year on year, generated over 4% of Ukraine's GDP and became one of the largest exporters of IT services in Europe. The war started a new chapter in the history of the industry not only in Ukraine, but also in countries where refugees are still arriving, because 94 percent of them are women, more than every third of them are 36-45 years old. Although most of them have no experience in working in IT, some start training, and this is a chance to equalize the proportions of women and men in the IT industry, because we have a huge deficit of IT specialists and today we know that it should not be filled only by men. Several Polish companies organize free programming courses for Ukrainian women, which is supposed to make it easier for them to start on the new labor market[8].

Mentioned policies will include investment in infrastructure to ensure stable and fast internet access for everyone, and to make it accessible and affordable. However, a strategy for an inclusive digital economy must go beyond infrastructure and also address economic, technical and social barriers to digital exclusion. While the digital divide limits opportunities for women and girls who are unable to connect, it also has broader social and economic impacts that affect everyone. With hundreds of millions fewer women able to use the internet, the world loses countless social, cultural and economic contributions it could make if it were able to harness the benefits of the internet.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that professionalism, knowledge, experience have no gender or metrics and soon, will always defend themselves. This truth breaks through with more and more power, showing that stereotypes are not only harmful, but also often distant from reality.

Addressing Sustainable Development Goals

The presented topic links with the following UN Sustainable Development Goals:

5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
    - 5.1. End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
    - 5.B. Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
    - 5.C. Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

8. Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.

[8]https://focusonbusiness.eu/pl/wiadomosci/mimo-wojny-ukrainska-branza-it-pracuje-na-pelnych-obrotach/27853 [access: 18.05.2023]

8.5. By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.
8.8. Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
    10.2. By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.
    10.3. Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.