WOMEN AT THE TABLE

Women@TheTable Submission to the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) for the Twenty-eighth session, Geneva, 7-11 April 2025

Gender-Responsive Digital Transformation:
Submission for WSIS+20 Review

Executive Summary

As the WSIS+20 review process unfolds, this submission presents critical recommendations to ensure gender equality becomes central to digital transformation processes globally. Despite twenty years of WSIS implementation, the gender digital divide persists and is widening in many contexts. As highlighted in the UNCTAD Discussion Note for WSIS+20 (UNCTAD/DTL/STICT/2023/4), digital transformations have not been inclusive or equitable, with women and girls systematically disadvantaged across multiple dimensions. This growing divide represents not just a failure to achieve equality, but also a significant missed opportunity for economic development, innovation, and social progress, particularly for developing economies. New technologies are frequently reproducing or amplifying existing inequalities rather than resolving them.

The WSIS+20 review offers a crucial opportunity to transform the WSIS framework from gender-neutral to gender-transformative, addressing structural barriers to women's full digital inclusion. We propose concrete, actionable recommendations for embedding gender equality throughout existing WSIS Action Lines, while simultaneously establishing a dedicated "Gender Action Line" to ensure sustained attention, resources, and accountability for gender-responsive digital transformation that can unlock economic potential in developing regions.

Current State Assessment: Gender Equality Stalled

In accordance with the UNCTAD Discussion Note's emphasis on the need to examine multidimensional inequalities in digital development as part of the WSIS+20 review process, we provide the following assessment of the gender digital landscape: Twenty years after WSIS, significant gaps remain when viewed through a gender lens:

- Persistent gender digital divide beyond access: While connectivity has expanded globally, women—particularly those in marginalized communities—face barriers across the spectrum of digital participation. According to the latest GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024, while the gender gap in mobile internet use in low- and middle-income countries has narrowed slightly to 15% (from 16% in 2022), significant regional disparities persist, with gaps of 22% in South Asia and 31% in Sub-Saharan Africa.[2] The smartphone ownership gender gap remains substantial at 16% across LMICs. The UNCTAD Discussion Note explicitly acknowledges this as a key challenge, noting that "the digital gender gap remains a critical barrier to inclusive development" (Section III, point 5).

- Technological amplification of inequalities: AI systems trained on biased data reproduce and scale discriminatory patterns, while social media algorithms enable unprecedented technology-facilitated gender-based violence targeting women, especially women journalists, human rights defenders, and politically active women.[3]

- Institutional fragmentation and policy silos: Gender considerations remain segregated rather than mainstreamed across digital governance frameworks, with women's meaningful participation in decision-making bodies still severely limited. This contradicts the WSIS+10 Vision which explicitly called for "ensuring the inclusion of women in the WSIS process" and "strengthening the

gender dimension in all action lines."

- Accountability deficit: Despite numerous declarations since 2003, concrete mechanisms for tracking and enforcing gender equality commitments within WSIS processes remain weak, with limited gender-disaggregated data collection and insufficient resources allocated to addressing structural barriers. The UNCTAD Discussion Note acknowledges this overall accountability gap, asking "how can we ensure effective implementation and follow-up of new commitments post-2025?" (Section IV).

- Emerging technological threats with gender implications: New digital developments, from biometric surveillance to algorithmic decision-making in critical sectors, create gender-specific risks that current frameworks are ill-equipped to address. As the UNCTAD Discussion Note observes, emerging technologies like AI are creating new divides and deepening existing inequalities, with particular impacts on women and girls.

The Imperative for Strengthened Gender Integration and a Dedicated Gender Action Line

The UNCTAD Discussion Note highlights the need to "redouble our focus on inclusion, including women and girls, disadvantaged communities, and developing countries" and emphasizes "increased capacity-building efforts" as a priority for the WSIS+20 review. To address these imperatives effectively, we must go beyond treating gender as merely a cross-cutting issue and establish dedicated mechanisms with clear mandates and resources:

There is overwhelming evidence demonstrating that gender equality isn't just a human rights imperative but also a prerequisite for sustainable digital development,

particularly for developing economies. The UNCTAD Discussion Note emphasizes that "developing countries need greater capacity and knowledge to leverage digital technologies for sustainable development" (Section III, point 3), but this cannot be achieved while the gender digital divide persists. For developing regions, closing this divide represents one of the most efficient pathways to accelerated economic growth:

- Studies by GSMA indicate closing the mobile internet gap between men and women in low- and middle-income countries could add US$700 billion in GDP growth over several years.[4] The GSMA's 2024 Mobile Gender Gap Report shows modest progress in narrowing gender gaps, but emphasizes that significant disparities persist, particularly in smartphone ownership and digital skills.[5]

- McKinsey research shows that achieving gender parity in the workforce—including digital/tech sectors—could add US$12 trillion to global GDP, with developing economies seeing the largest relative gains.[5]

- The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law report demonstrates that countries with lower legal barriers for women in economic participation show higher per capita income growth rates.[6]

- Research from the IMF establishes that countries in the bottom half of the gender inequality index could boost their GDP by an average of 35% by closing gender gaps in economic participation.[7]

While gender considerations were included in the original WSIS frameworks, they have been treated as supplementary rather than foundational. The experience of the past two decades clearly demonstrates that without explicit, dedicated mechanisms focused on gender equality, efforts become diffused, under-resourced, and

ultimately ineffective.

The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024 identifies five key barriers that must be addressed systematically: affordability concerns, literacy and digital skills challenges, safety and security issues, relevance of services and content, and access to supportive social norms.8 These barriers require a coordinated approach across Action Lines and dedicated focus through a Gender Action Line to ensure they are effectively tackled.

Therefore, we propose a dual approach:

1. **Strengthening gender integration across all existing WSIS Action Lines through mandatory gender mainstreaming requirements, specific targets, dedicated resources, and accountability mechanisms.**
2. **Establishing a dedicated "Gender Action Line" modeled after successful precedents like the Lima Work Programme on Gender in climate processes, with specific mandates, resources, and institutional home to drive transformative change.**

Recommendations for Transforming WSIS Action Lines

In alignment with the UNCTAD Discussion Note's call to consider "what new priorities should be introduced into international cooperation frameworks to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of digital advancement for sustainable development," we propose the following structural changes:

1. Establish a Dedicated Gender Action Line

For CSTD and member states' consideration:

- Create a dedicated "Gender Action Line" with its own secretariat, expert advisory group, and funding mechanism, addressing the UNCTAD Discussion Note's call to "redouble our focus on inclusion" (Section III).
- Mandate multistakeholder collaboration involving government authorities, women's rights organizations, tech industry representatives, and academic institutions.
- Develop a comprehensive framework of gender-specific indicators, targets, and timelines for measuring progress.
- Establish a formal reporting mechanism with biennial review of progress.
- Create a dedicated financing facility to support gender-responsive digital initiatives, particularly in least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS), as prioritized in the UNCTAD Discussion Note (Section III, point 2).

2. Mandate Gender Mainstreaming Across All Existing Action Lines

- Require gender impact assessments for all digital initiatives and policies under each Action Line.
- Establish Gender Focal Points with decision-making authority for each Action Line.
- Implement a "gender marker" system to track financial allocations supporting gender equality.
- Develop specific guidance for each Action Line on incorporating gender-responsive approaches.
- Create accountability mechanisms with consequences for non-compliance.

3. Reform Governance Models to Ensure Women's Meaningful Participation

Responding to the UNCTAD Discussion Note's question on "what new and enhanced modalities for inclusive participation can be introduced to ensure diverse and effective engagement of all stakeholders," we propose:

- Establish requirements for gender-balanced representation (minimum 50%) in all WSIS governance bodies, technical committees, and policy forums.
- Create dedicated funding mechanisms for women's rights organizations to participate effectively in WSIS processes.
- Develop feminist facilitation approaches that address power imbalances in multistakeholder dialogues.
- Implement multilingual participation tools that accommodate diverse communication needs.
- Create mentorship programs specifically supporting women's leadership in technical discussions.

4. Address Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

- Develop comprehensive frameworks for addressing online and technology-facilitated gender-based violence that balance protection with freedom of expression.
- Establish platform accountability standards with specific requirements for preventing, monitoring, and responding to gender-based abuse.
- Create specialized capacity building for law enforcement and judicial systems.
- Support technical safety innovations developed by and for women from diverse backgrounds.
- Mandate transparency reporting on platform responses to gender-based violence.

5. Implement Feminist Approaches to Data and AI Governance

Addressing the UNCTAD Discussion Note's emphasis on "emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence" and concerns about "exacerbating existing divides and creating new ones," we recommend:

- Establish requirements for representative and inclusive data collection across all digital initiatives.
- Develop gender-specific algorithmic impact assessment frameworks for AI systems.
- Create accountability mechanisms for addressing algorithmic discrimination.
- Support community-based data governance models that recognize women's data sovereignty.
- Establish ethical frameworks for AI development that explicitly incorporate feminist principles.
- Create dedicated funding for AI systems developed by women to address gender-specific challenges.

6. Transform Connectivity Models to Address Women's Specific Needs

Responding to the UNCTAD Discussion Note's emphasis on "closing connectivity gaps" and the need for "appropriate infrastructure" (Section III), we propose:

- Reform regulatory frameworks to support community-owned networks that address local contexts and barriers, especially in developing economies where traditional connectivity models have failed women.
- Create dedicated financing mechanisms for women-led connectivity initiatives, recognizing their superior understanding of local needs and barriers.
- Establish gender-responsive universal service funds with specific targets for connecting women, particularly in rural and low-income areas of developing countries.

- Develop affordability standards that account for gender gaps in economic resources, addressing the UNCTAD Discussion Note's concern about "persistent disparities in connectivity" (Section II).
- Support public access facilities designed specifically to accommodate women's needs and constraints, such as safety concerns, time limitations due to care responsibilities, and cultural factors.

7. Strengthen Implementation Through Evidence and Measurement

In direct response to the UNCTAD Discussion Note's query about "the best mechanisms for tracking and measuring progress towards a more inclusive information society," we propose:

- Mandate collection and publication of gender-disaggregated data across all WSIS Action Lines.
- Develop standardized methodologies for measuring the gender digital divide across multiple dimensions.
- Create a global repository of evidence-based interventions that have successfully addressed gender digital gaps.
- Fund rigorous research on gender-specific impacts of digital technologies in diverse contexts.
- Establish joint monitoring frameworks with gender-specific indicators aligned with SDG reporting.

Implementation Mechanisms and Accountability Frameworks

The UNCTAD Discussion Note asks how we can "ensure effective implementation and follow-up of new commitments post-2025." We believe these accountability mechanisms are essential:

Effective implementation of these recommendations requires concrete accountability mechanisms:

- Mandatory Reporting: Require all WSIS Action Line facilitators to report annually on specific gender equality indicators and progress toward established targets.
- Financial Commitments: Establish a dedicated funding mechanism for gender-responsive digital initiatives, with contributions from member states and private sector actors.
- Independent Assessment: Create an independent expert body comprised primarily of feminist digital rights experts to evaluate progress on gender equality commitments.
- Verification Processes: Develop structured civil society shadow reporting processes to verify official progress claims and highlight implementation gaps.
- Time-Bound Targets: Establish specific, measurable, and time-bound targets for closing gender gaps across all dimensions of digital inclusion.

Conclusion: The Case for a Gender Action Line

- The evidence is clear: approaches that treat gender as a cross-cutting issue without dedicated institutional mechanisms have failed to deliver the transformation needed. Despite two decades of rhetorical commitments to gender equality in the information society, the gender digital divide persists and is widening in crucial areas.

- As the UNCTAD Discussion Note acknowledges, "to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of digital advancement for sustainable development," we must fundamentally reconsider our approaches. The Note's explicit reference to addressing "different forms of inequality, including the gender divide"

validates our call for strengthened mechanisms.

- A dedicated Gender Action Line is not just desirable—it is essential for addressing the systemic barriers women and gender-diverse people face in the digital landscape. Without this focused approach, we risk perpetuating a digital future that excludes half the world's population and misses the tremendous social and economic opportunities that gender equality would bring.

- For developing economies in particular, closing the gender digital divide represents one of the most efficient strategies for accelerating economic growth and achieving sustainable development goals. Studies consistently show that investments in women's digital inclusion yield higher returns than many other development interventions, creating multiplier effects throughout communities and economies.[9]

- The combined approach of strengthening gender integration across existing Action Lines while establishing a dedicated Gender Action Line represents our best opportunity to avoid repeating the limitations of the past twenty years. This dual strategy acknowledges both the cross-cutting nature of gender issues and the need for focused institutional attention and resources.

- The WSIS+20 review presents a pivotal moment to move beyond rhetorical commitments and implement concrete structural changes that transform the Information Society from a site of continued inequality to a foundation for women's rights and empowerment. Gender equality cannot remain an afterthought in digital development—it must become its cornerstone.

- The cost of continued incremental approaches is too high—women's equal participation in the digital future is essential not only for justice but for developing technologies that serve humanity's full diversity and potential. The

UNCTAD Discussion Note asks us to consider whether "the WSIS action lines and outcomes [are] fit for purpose" in our current context. When it comes to gender equality, the answer is clearly no—not without substantial strengthening and a dedicated line of action with its own mandate, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

- We therefore urge the CSTD and all stakeholders to adopt these recommendations as central elements of the WSIS+20 review, establishing gender equality as a non-negotiable requirement for an inclusive Information Society.

Footnotes

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