

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Interactive expert panel on the priority theme: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls Tuesday, 14 March 2023, 3.00 – 6.00 pm, United Nations Headquarters

Dear bureau of the commission on the status for women, distinguished guests and delegates, dear ladies and gentlemen, It is with great admiration and respect that I address each of you and most sincerely thank the UN Women for this opportunity – today I can share our experience and a journey towards equal education in the digital age.

In 2016, we learned about the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ for the first time, we realized massive power and opportunities created by data and connectivity, AI and analytics, human-machine interaction, and improvements in robotics. Today, it is hard to recall any industry in the world that has not embraced digital transformation. We have all witnessed how technology became the biggest accelerator for economic growth. Still, women are vastly underrepresented in the areas, where industries benefit from technological development. Moreover, new ‘Global Gender Gap Report’ says it will take another 132 years to achieve workplace equality. With such projections, we can state - many countries across the world are not on track to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 by 2030.

This leads to poor innovations ecosystems, limited talent available to industries and among many others, to dangerous social impact.

I am a woman from Georgia. In my country, you will find women who are not afraid to take bold steps. The ones who, despite all obstacles, continue to fight for freedom of their choice. The ones, for whom profession has no gender, and interest has no boundaries. The ones who are not afraid that their roles, rights and duties are predetermined by others. However, we are facing gender based violence, harassment and femicide, unequal pay and glass ceiling, founders gap and lack of access to finance, including venture capital, unpaid domestic work, gender digital divide and many other problems. In Georgia, only 14-15% of girls choose tech as their future career path. Women are a clear minority in tech industry. Despite such unfavorable context, I strongly believe we can drive positive change in our communities and create impact.

We can start from:

- Triggering interest of girls in technologies, keeping them engaged and motivated, offering them in-demand skill sets via Coding schools, tech bootcamps and festivals, ideathons, hackathons, STEM competitions and similar events delivered in partnership with public and private stakeholders;
- Continuously promoting the growing opportunities of tech world, leaving the biases and stereotypes behind;
- Storytelling with women role models - using a promising approach and inspiring - if one could make it, anyone can!

Next, we can continue working on capacity building, creating inclusive and technologically advanced infrastructure. We need a multi sectoral approach to design an enabling environment while respecting intersectionality. Not every initiative is relevant for everybody, so we have to ensure that the needs and experiences of diverse groups of women are taken into account.

As the following step, to close the digital divide, we can communicate a clear and bold message: tech should be equally affordable to women and girls. To make it happen, we need ability to launch fully funded programs, give scholarships, introduce grant opportunities. In this case, public private partnerships can demonstrate good cases in countries. Private sector funds and public funding separately, should also be strategically planned and implemented. It should be highlighted that international donor organizations enormously contribute to building an inclusive education ecosystem in a digital world. Financially supporting smaller institutions and organizations with mission, expertise and a very clear vision but insufficient resources for taking action is indeed a way to sustainable development of countries. And in these needs, no country is an exception. Funding opportunities and for civil society organizations are essential to support women and protect human rights overall. Finally, we can focus on advocating policies and collaborating with government institutions, involving civil society actors and wider spectrum of stakeholders. Policy is a strong force to promote tech education and digital inclusion, to address gender-based violence, negative stereotypes and limited access to technologies.

Let me now share our experience and how we took steps to address these challenges: With support of UN Women Georgia, Business and Technology University (BTU) launched the most unprecedented project in Georgia - Coding School for Women. With values and a mission behind, we increased awareness among girls and their families, educating them about technology, its positive impact and related career opportunities. Our efforts covered every region of Georgia. We designed a digital literacy program, which is offered on annual basis, fully funded by BTU or other international organizations. We designed a Career Bootcamp for women, where mentors provide full support to participants about career path, concepts of equal pay, promotion, working conditions and many related factors. We were courageous and boldly challenged harmful stereotypes prevailing in the society. We confronted the biases that prevent women from realizing their technological potential. With strong and effective communication, we made it clear to our stakeholders and our community: Not only the low participation of women hinders their professional development, but also deprives the industry of valuable intellectual resource. Successful implementation of new, innovative ideas are exposed to risk because of the severe gender imbalance. "500 Women in Tech" is a flagship program at Business and Technology University which is implemented with support of UN Women Georgia and the government of Norway. The project aims at increasing women's participation in technology, providing free trainings to 500 women across Georgia. As participants complete their 6-months course, our partner companies (more than 50 already) offer them paid internships or fulltime jobs. I am proud to say that within the program, not only we involved women from occupied territories of Georgia, where Russia has taken away their freedom of choice, but also, we welcomed 50 refugees from Ukraine, who gained different skills in tech. Today, the narrative has changed and the need for participation has grown immensely. Coding School for Women additionally raised funds from USAID, adding 1500 beneficiaries from rural areas of our country. For them, and for many others, together, we are building high-tech computer labs, where women and girls will learn Front-End and Back-End Development, Digital Product Testing, UI/UX design, different coding languages and many others. Coding school for women has won two international awards but most importantly, it has helped thousands of women in Georgia to change their lives. Here, we unite around one idea – we want to support one another and contribute to creation of equal, diverse and inclusive world. World like this, would be beautiful and beneficial for everyone. But not everybody feels the same way. We have learned how to develop advanced technologies, we explored nuclear energy, invented electricity and internet, explored space, invented things that have significant impact on our lives, but still, people have not learned how to support one another. We don't want to fight. But until we achieve equal educational opportunities for women in the digital age, we will.

Thank you for your attention.

