

Background Guide for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)

Committee Overview and Mandate

Introduction

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the principal international body of the United Nations (UN) for discussion on the process of developing and implementing international norms and standards related to the empowerment of women and gender equality. It was established by ECOSOC resolution 11(II) of 21 June 1946. Each year, CSW reports to ECOSOC during the Management Session.

The sixty-seventh session of CSW (6-17 March 2023) had 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”.

Governance, Mandate, Membership and Structure

The original mandate of CSW was to provide recommendations and reports to ECOSOC on promoting women’s rights in political, economic, social, and educational fields and urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women’s rights. In 1996, ECOSOC’s Resolution 1996/6 expanded the Commission’s mandate and decided that it should take a leading role in monitoring and reviewing progress and problems in the implementation of the 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (BpfA), and in mainstreaming a gender perspective in UN activities.

CSW will generally: outline international norms and standards and issue policy recommendations for gender equality; adopt agreed conclusions, declarations, and resolutions on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; advise intergovernmental bodies on gender mainstreaming; hold discussions on, and track progress toward, the realization of the implementation of the BpFA.

CSW will generally not: implement or manage programs and projects on gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment; support Member States, governments, and civil society in implementing programs and projects on gender equality.

Funding of CSW’s annual meetings and other deliverables is provided by the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment for Women (UN Women) through the UN regular budget. Forty-five Member States of the United Nations serve as members of the Commission at any one time. The Commission consists of one representative from each of the 45 Member States elected by the Economic and Social Council on the basis of equitable geographical distribution.

Bridging the Gender Digital Divide

Background

The digital divide is the gap between those who have access to and use ICTs, including internet connectivity, internet-enabled devices, and digital literacy skills, and those who do not.¹ The digital divide is a global phenomenon with over 1 billion new internet users having been added over the last five years, while nearly 3.7 billion people were still offline in 2019. As the significant influence of internet connectivity on equity, innovation, and economic progress becomes more widely acknowledged, the availability of affordable and accessible internet has become crucial. Given that numerous fundamental aspects of society now rely on internet access, having accessible digital infrastructure has become a vital component of a basic standard of living. The potential for digital technologies to enhance people's economic and social well-being is vast. However, there are still obstacles when it comes to women accessing and utilizing these technologies.

The United Nations, under the leadership of Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, is committed to achieving universal connectivity by 2030, as demonstrated by the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. The Broadband Commission, led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has been dedicated to achieving universal connectivity for over ten years. In line with this mission, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and ITU have recently developed the *Giga Initiative*, aiming to provide internet access to every school. Additionally, the UNHCR's *Innovation Service* advocates for digital access for refugees and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has long been involved in efforts to extend connectivity to remote areas and marginalized populations.

Urban-Rural Digital Divide

Investing in infrastructure like broadband and cell phone towers in rural areas, where the population is often low, is not as economically beneficial as in urban areas. This disproportionately affects women in developing countries, who are more likely to live in rural areas, while men tend to reside in urban areas. Women make up 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries.² Women and girls in rural areas face persistent structural barriers, such as a higher likelihood of being out of school than boys, in comparison with girls in urban areas.³ More than 500 million rural women do not have basic digital literacy skills, limiting employment opportunities.⁴ Additionally, women and girls in rural areas often work in agriculture, and their labor is frequently unpaid or seen as a contribution to the family. When they do have employment, women in rural areas are likely to have short-term and more precarious jobs than men. These factors ultimately result in limited access to technology in areas with low technological resources, where going online may be difficult or impossible due to a lack of resources, including finances.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 recognizes rural women as a particularly disadvantaged group in need of additional rights. Article 14 addresses rural women exclusively and specifically, stipulating that they-like their urban counterparts-should enjoy a panoply of rights: education, health care, and an array of civil and political rights.⁵

Small-scale farmers benefit from the impact of digital technologies on their farming practices. It allows them access information on how to improve their production, which is easily available online. They also can receive alerts about weather patterns and hazards such as flash floods, which helps them prepare for the impact of climate change. By going online, women farmers can reach customers they would not have been able to otherwise, expanding their business opportunities. Additionally, women farmers in remote areas can access banking, insurance, and financing through fintech, enabling them to safeguard and expand their businesses while facilitating payment transactions.

UN Women established the *Buy from Women* (BfW) platform under the *Global Flagship Programme on Climate Smart Agriculture*, to provide women farmers with access to financial and banking service information through digital land records and mobile wallets. In rural Jordan, an e-wallet scheme by the International Fund for Agricultural Development's (IFAD) called the *Rural Economic Growth and Employment Program (REGEP)*, targets rural households below the poverty line, sending grant payments directly to farmers. Three in five people who availed of this were women, having used the e-wallet to receive payments from buyers, even when they are not carrying cash.

Education

The digital gender gap continues expanding in many developing countries, creating a specific need to support digital gender equality. Globally, in 2022, 62% of men are using the Internet, compared with 57% of women.⁶ When women and girls are empowered through information and communication technologies (ICTs), societies overall benefit. With access to the Internet and skills to use digital technologies, they gain opportunities to start new businesses, sell products in new markets, and find better-paid jobs; pursue education and obtain health and financial services; exchange information; and participate more fully in public life.

Without increased digital growth, girls will have fewer employment opportunities and will face additional barriers in joining the workforce. Digital literacy is increasingly seen as an essential skill for employability and has been linked to higher earning potential and new economic opportunities, as over 90% of jobs worldwide have a digital component.⁷ Women and girls are 25 per cent less likely than men to have sufficient knowledge and digital skills to use technology.⁸ While girls do as well as boys in science in most countries, women occupy less than one-third of positions in the technology sector globally. Schools and community organizations can help overcome these barriers by encouraging teachers to incorporate computer games into their classroom activities. Plan International and UN Habitat's *Block by Block* initiative in Vietnam, for instance, uses the popular video game Minecraft as a tool for engaging adolescent girls in participatory urban planning. Girls address safety issues they have identified in their communities, particularly those affecting female residents, such as unlit streets on their routes home from school.

Providing universal broadband access for teachers, students and schools, and ensuring digital literacy for its users, can increase girls' exposure to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM,) particularly those from less privileged backgrounds. Digital learning

provides new opportunities to adapt educational environments and curricula to the needs of girls and students from marginalized groups. Globally, women constitute less than one-third of enrollees in higher education ICT studies – a gender disparity without parallel in other disciplines, including traditionally male-dominated fields such as medicine and science. Digital resources, such as websites and mobile applications focused on health and legal rights, can enable women to make informed decisions to safeguard themselves and their families. Online social networks and digital communications can also provide women with the opportunity to share knowledge beyond their immediate community. Mobile learning opportunities, ranging from literacy apps to massive open online courses (MOOCs) on topics such as astronomy or caring for older relatives with dementia, can provide new educational opportunities, particularly for girls who are not in school and adult women. Job search engines and professional networking sites allow women to compete in the labor market, while e-commerce platforms and digital banking services can help to increase their income and independence.

Digital Skills in a Workplace

Recognizing that ICT access plays a major role in the changing the world of work, it is crucial that women receive equal access to ICTs; the continuing gender-based “digital divide” represents a significant obstacle to women having access to diverse and meaningful employment opportunities. A smaller number of women studying ICTs in secondary school and college translates into a gender gap in the labor market. Globally, women hold only 24 per cent of all digital sector jobs, and in developing countries, men are 2.7 times more likely than women to work in the digital sector.

To empower women entrepreneurs in developing countries to participate in the digital economy, a comprehensive approach that involves cooperation among governments, businesses, and civil society is necessary. This approach should strive to provide women with access to digital resources, education, skills, and financial support. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development’s (UNCTAD) *E-Trade for Women* initiative is promoting the engagement of women entrepreneurs in developing countries by facilitating inclusive and effective policy dialogues to address the obstacles that women face and create a more gender-responsive environment. It is also inspiring more women to venture into digital entrepreneurship by providing masterclasses and creating a community of digital entrepreneurs. So far, the initiative has reached founders of almost 200 women-owned digital businesses in more than 40 developing countries.

Conclusion

Delegates should focus their research on these three subsections: the urban-rural digital divide, education, and digital skills in the workplace. By addressing the issues which can lead to women being unable to obtain employment or equal educational opportunities, delegates will be able to create comprehensive resolutions and make recommendations to help women and girls develop strong digital skills through education.

Questions to Consider

How can access to ICTs and digital skills empower women?

What inequalities exist for women in the workplace?

What role does education play in the economy?

What are the additional difficulties that women in rural areas face?

What jobs are women more likely to hold in developing Member States?

How can UN initiatives on digital literacy help women in rural areas access better employment?

What can be done to expand digital access, particularly for women?

How can access to digital economy contribute to women's empowerment?

What are the other international organizations and UN bodies which deal with gender digital divide?

Helpful Links

1. <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>
2. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/digitaldevelopment/overview>
3. <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/bridging-digital-gender-divide-technically-empowered-young-women-share-their>
4. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/overview>