Inclusive Digital Transformation for Women & Girls and Youth:

At the core of the digital revolution is the question of access to digital technologies.

Close to 85% of people living in the least developed countries are offline. But even more alarmingly, women living in the least developed countries are 31% less likely than their male counterparts to be connected to the internet.

We know that connectivity plays a key role in citizen prosperity and moving out of poverty. If we don't bridge the digital gender gap, we are at a dangerously high risk of leaving an entire generation of women and girls behind.

Additionally, if digital transformation policies don't intentionally build a path forward for youth, they will not only miss out on the benefits technology is presenting to level the socio-economic playing field, but it also reduces the employability rate for a nation's future workforce.

Today, I am going to discuss policies that can lead to an inclusive digital economy both for women and for youth in the least developed countries (LDCs), small island developing States (SIDS), the landlocked developing countries (LLDC), and countries with transition economics.

Inclusive Digital Transformation for Women and Girls

For women and girls living in these regions, the internet has real potential to mitigate or even remove the barriers that have precluded them from participating more fully in digital society.

But it's important that we carve out specific policies for bringing more women online and empowering them with digital literacy skills, because access to digital technologies is not gender neutral.

There are three key areas that policy needs to address when it comes to bridging the digital gender gap:

1) Socio-cultural barriers
2) Accessibility
3) Education and literacy

Starting with socio-cultural barriers. A study by Women and the Web in the least developed countries and countries with transitioning economies, reported that one in five women surveyed in their study believe that the Internet is not appropriate for them; and that their families would disapprove. Moreover, they believed there was little benefit for them even if they did have access.

A study done by GSMA on the mobile gender gap had similar findings.

Which means that even if we were to solve the issues of access or literacy, women may still not engage with the technologies as a result of cultural barriers.

To combat this. We need policies aimed specifically at educating both men and women, on the value and importance of bringing women on line.

But what is critical for overcoming these social-cultural barriers, is centralizing the support of government in bringing women online. And ensuring that such support is visible for all citizens to see as the new path forward.

A second critical barrier for bringing more women online is access. Including both affordability and physical proximity to learning how to use digital technologies.

Which means that policies need to focus on making the acquisition of digital technologies and training on how to use these technologies, both affordable and within geographical reach for women.

This is where the private sector can play a key role.

An leading example:

In 2015, Google India partnered with Tata Trusts, one of the oldest philanthropic institutions in India,and launched Internet Saati to equip women in villages across India with basic Internet skills and provide them with Internet-enabled devices.
This partnership addressed both socio-cultural barriers, as well as affordability and physical access through a train the trainer' model. Whereby Women from remote villages are trained on using the Internet and equipped with data-enabled devices. These women go on to help teach other women in their communities. As of April 2019, there are more than 81,500 Internet Saathis who have helped over 28 million women learn about the Internet across 289,000 villages

On a policy side, creating an environment that incentivizes private public partnerships is key, and encouraging existing technology providers to fill those voids.

A third critical barrier for women is education and literacy. But it also holds one of the most powerful tickets to bridging the digital gender divide.

A research report on Women and Gender in ICT Statistics attempted to measure the gender digital divide in six francophone countries in West Arica. They found no gender gap in connectivity or usage among young women who were educated to secondary school level and beyond. Indicating that education is one of the most powerful tools in combating the gender gap in internet access and use before it even starts.

Ensuring that boys and girls have equal access to education is an investment in a country's future. It is also much more cost effective than trying to retroactively bridge the divide.

Inclusive Digital Transformation for Youth

As a millennial myself, I know the importance of digital inclusion for my generation. Young people are the building blocks of leadership succession in society. As we have witnessed through Covid-19, in our increasingly digital world, access to the internet equates with access to education, the economy, and opportunity.

According to Mariya Gabriel, the EU Commissioner for the Digital Economy, after 2020, 90% of jobs will require digital skills. If we aren't equipping youth with an opportunity to build those skills, they will be left out of the economy entirely. Which is not only detrimental to their individual trajectories, but to the economic health of countries as well.

There are three key policy initiatives when it comes to inclusive digital transformation for youth in the least developed countries (LDCs), small island developing States (SIDS), the landlocked developing countries (LLDC), and countries with transition economics.

1) Widespread access to broadband is essential. The World Bank has found that a 10% increase in internet access correlates to a 1.38% increase in GDP in least developed countries. Without access to broadband, young people will be extremely disadvantaged.

2) Ensure that smart devices, such as smart phones and computers, remain affordable for youth. This can be done through subsidies, private public partnerships, and internal reviews of sector-specific taxes and fees that may exacerbate the cost barriers to acquiring or using digital technologies. The combination of a smartphone and widespread internet access offers incredible promise and economic opportunities for youth.

3) Policies prioritizing investments in digital literacy for youth. An example of what this could look like: in Canada, where I am from, the ICT council established a national guide for building Canadian digital literacy skills in education, industry, and at home. It's a one stop shop where teachers and youth from across the country

can turn for guidance on what skills they should be building and pathways for how to acquire those skills. It has been a tremendous success for the country.

I will conclude by saying, digital transformation provides governments with an opportunity to rethink the way they deliver services to the public, and opens doors to opportunities for economic development and citizen prosperity. As a woman, a woman of colour, and a youth, I am excited for the opportunities that digital transformation can bring to my peers around the world, and I encourage leaders to not view this opportunity as solely a government transformation, but a societal transformation that produces better outcomes for all.

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