



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-seventh session

6–17 March 2023

Agenda item 3

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Ministerial round tables on “Good practices in addressing barriers to bridge the gender digital divide and promote education in the digital age for achieving gender equality”**

#### **Chair’s summary**

1. On 7 March 2023, the Commission on the Status of Women held ministerial round tables on “Good practices in addressing barriers to bridge the gender digital divide and promote education in the digital age for achieving gender equality”, in the context of 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”. Participants exchanged experiences, lessons learned and good practices in relation to the topic, with an emphasis on measures taken to create an enabling environment to bridge the gender digital divide and promote education in the digital age for achieving gender equality.

2. The Minister of Social Development of South Africa, Lindiwe Zulu, chaired the first round table and made introductory remarks. The Executive Director of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Catherine Russell, provided closing remarks. Ministers and high-level officials from 21 Member States participated in the first round table. The Vice-Minister for Labour and Social Protection of Mongolia, Zulphar Sarkhad, chaired the second round table, and the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, Doreen Bogdan-Martin, provided closing remarks. Ministers and high-level officials from 23 Member States participated in the second round table.

#### **Addressing inequalities in digital access to bridge the gender digital divide**

3. Ministers underscored that bridging the gender digital divide was a precondition for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and provided new opportunities for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and



girls. They highlighted that women did not enjoy the same access to the Internet and digital technologies as men and that the most marginalized faced significant barriers. Speakers emphasized that affordability, poor infrastructure, lack of education and digital skills, and safety and privacy concerns remained notable obstacles to meaningful connectivity for women and girls, and that those obstacles were rooted in long-standing gendered stereotypes and negative social norms.

4. Ministers acknowledged the importance of developing strong institutional policies and programmes to bridge the gender digital divide, including reviewing and strengthening legal frameworks to support digital development. Speakers called for the integration of gender perspectives across all national government policies and plans, including the development of targeted strategies and ambitious targets to ensure equitable access for women and girls. Ministers stressed the importance of considering multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities in the formulation of interventions to avoid amplifying existing divides, affecting, for example, women from rural areas, women with low levels of income or literacy, women migrants, older women and women with disabilities.

5. Speakers highlighted the underrepresentation of women ministers and regulators in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector and stressed the need for efforts to increase the proportion of women in executive and managerial positions in the technology field. Participants also underscored the need for gender-disaggregated data and the development of indicators and surveys on women's access to ICT. Ministers emphasized the value of multilateral and multinational partnerships in guaranteeing digital access for all women and girls.

6. Ministers provided positive examples of designing and implementing policies and programmes to bridge the gender digital divide, including the development of national broadband or digital strategies and the establishment of national ministries on digitalization as key to promoting equitable access. Strategies cited for facilitating affordable connectivity included the provision of free or low-cost devices, such as laptops and mobile telephones, and access hubs and Wi-Fi networks, including in public spaces, rural areas and villages. Speakers also recognized the importance of strengthening digital infrastructure, in particular to support groups in vulnerable situations.

7. Ministers stressed the importance of digital technologies in increasing women's access to information, services, education, employment and labour markets. Participants emphasized the importance of digital skills training and upskilling in building the capacity of women to leverage digital platforms for those purposes. Speakers highlighted e-government tools, including for birth registrations and election processes, online banking services, e-health, e-commerce and other digitalized systems and services. Positive examples shared included the use of mobile applications to support women farmers in gaining access to the digital economy and the use of digital platforms to enable women to access sexual and reproductive health information.

#### **Promoting equitable digital education and skills and women and girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics**

8. Ministers recognized the significant disparities in digital connectivity at the school level, as well as in the acquisition of digital skills, cautioning that limited use of digital tools by women and girls could lead to greater gender gaps and widening inequalities. Ministers expressed concern that women were underrepresented in ICT and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields in higher education and employment.

9. Speakers called for the integration of universal digital education for all women and girls at all levels of the education system, emphasizing that digital education should be obligatory for girls and boys alike and that lifelong learning was crucial for achieving gender equality. It was recognized that increasing school enrolment and retention levels for girls was a key priority and that the provision of sexual and reproductive health education was critical to that effort. Some speakers highlighted progress in working towards achieving gender parity in enrolment or graduation levels in secondary and tertiary education.

10. Digital literacy and competencies were crucial in ensuring full access by women and girls to information and services and the participation of women in the labour market in the changing world of work. Participants also highlighted the need to address the disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work carried out by women and girls and other barriers to education and employment. A number of participants also emphasized the disproportionate impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies on women's and girls' digital access and education.

11. Ministers highlighted the importance of providing Internet access in schools and training educators to deliver equitable digital learning, as well as deconstructing gender stereotypes, including in curricula and textbooks. Speakers emphasized the need to provide varied learning modalities to ensure the participation of all women and girls in digital education, including courses that took place in the evenings or remotely and blended learning. Some speakers recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic had accelerated remote education and that the capacities gained through that experience should be retained and extended. Ministers also highlighted the value of research in educational technology (known as "edtech") to enable smart decision-making on the application of digital technologies to support learning environments.

12. Ministers recognized that interventions to increase the number of women and girls in STEM fields must include early childhood education programmes. It was acknowledged that approaches ought to centre on changing attitudes and stereotypes around STEM career pathways. Speakers provided positive examples of various entry points, including the facilitation of access by girls to women role models in STEM, the provision of dedicated scholarships, career orientation and taster days for women and girls, and the development of programmes dedicated to retraining women graduates in STEM skills.

13. Ministers recognized the role of national Governments in strengthening education and employment opportunities to increase the number of women in STEM, while working closely with higher education institutions and the private sector. Several speakers described dedicated national plans and programmes to increase the participation of women in STEM fields, as well as public events and national celebration days dedicated to raising awareness of the topic. Speakers also highlighted capacity-building initiatives and programmes undertaken with United Nations entities in that area.