GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2024
SPECIAL EDITION

WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future

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Gender in global digital discussions: A timeline

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For women and gender-diverse people, digital technologies, in particular information and communications technologies (ICTs), may be an important tool to overcome barriers to freedom of expression, and to build their economic agency and political representation. However, inequalities that women face in terms of economic power, education and access to resources also affect their participation in shaping the development and use of digital technologies, and in debates and policy-making processes at the national and global levels.

While these challenges remain, through sustained activism, gender has played a growing and more prominent role in the global digital discussions. This report seeks to provide an overview of the normative progress in this regard.

The initial section will look at how gender has slowly achieved a more prominent role in policy discussions taking place at the United Nations (UN), in particular in internet governance, human rights, cybersecurity and cybercrime processes; that is to say, core digital policy spaces and processes.

The following section does the reverse: mapping how technology incrementally gained prominence in core gender policy spaces and processes.

Advances made on these two fronts have been, of course, parallel and reinforcing – the division proposed is, in a way, artificial. But the groups, activists, UN agencies and state representatives acting in these spaces too often are not the same.

The final sections of this report bring the historical account to present debates, especially in relation to the Global Digital Compact (GDC). In the case of both the GDC and the WSIS+20 negotiations, this report seeks to argue for (i) the importance of recognising, and building and expanding on historical struggles that led to slow legal recognition of the relationship between tech and gender, and (ii) the need to create increased interaction, synergy and collaboration between digital rights and gender rights civil society organisations, activists and researchers.

This report is in effect a policy paper that focuses on normative developments in the past 30 years. Policy developments, however, are only possible as a result of significant research, movement building and other types of advocacy and activism that can never be fully reflected in dry accounts of global negotiations and what takes place in UN corridors. Nothing that is described below could be achieved without the relentless activities of women in all their diversity fighting for their rights, on the ground, in diverse contexts across the globe. Nothing that is described below is exempt of the power relations and dynamics characteristic of global politics, and the exclusion and selectivity that results from it.

Gender in tech: An agenda still under construction

At the global level, the Fourth Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, is considered a defining moment in the discussions concerning the relationship between gender and technology. Information technology was seen for the first time as a powerful tool that women could use for mobilisation, information exchange and empowerment. Substantive issues relating to women and ICTs, however, despite being debated, were still somewhat on the margins of the core agenda.

In the years following Beijing, international awareness around this gender agenda started to grow – women's participation in the regional and global preparations for the Beijing meeting also helped build a network of women concerned about gender and ICT issues and policies.[1]

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1   Primo, N. (2003). *Gender Issues in the Information Society.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000132967

Five years later, in the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+5, June 2000), effective use of ICTs emerged as one of the major challenges to be addressed in promoting women's advancement. In July 2000, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) signed a memorandum of understanding to collaborate on developing gender-responsive approaches to telecommunications and ICT policy development.

In March 2002, the World Telecommunication Development Conference agreed on the establishment of a gender unit within the Telecommunication Development Sector (ITU-D), the mainstreaming of gender issues throughout the organisation's work, and the conversion of its Task Force on Gender Issues into a permanent Working Group of the ITU-D. The conference also urged the inclusion of a gender perspective in the themes and work of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

At UNESCO, one of the key programming areas at that point was Women and the Media, under which it launched two special projects in 1996: "Women Working on the Net" and "Women Speaking to Women: Women's rural community radio in least developed countries". Through the Women in the Media programme, the organisation sought to assist member states in developing their communication, information and informatics capacities in practical and policy terms.

All these efforts provided critical background experiences and knowledge when the discussions around the first WSIS began in 2002.

At the first regional preparatory meeting of the WSIS process, held in Bamako, Mali in July 2002, a group of about 12 organisations who attended the meeting responded to an invitation by UNIFEM to contribute to ensuring that gender dimensions were included in the process of defining and creating the global information society.[2]

This group was multistakeholder, including women from government, private telecommunications services providers, women located in UN agencies, as well as women in NGOs and other civil society bodies. These organisations and representatives came together as the founders of what was set to become a global WSIS Gender Caucus, intent on advocating for the inclusion of gender concerns during the preparatory processes and WSIS summits, as well as in the outputs of these processes.

At the first global WSIS Preparatory Conference held in Geneva in July 2002, women's groups active in gender and the ICT field argued for the need for a separate but parallel gender caucus to make sure the particular concerns of the gender and ICT activists located in NGOs were well represented, both within the multistakeholder gender caucus and the broader WSIS civil society structure caucus. This group, the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group, developed *The "Seven Musts": Priority Issues for Gender Equality in the WSIS Process*, at the second WSIS Preparatory Conferences held in February 2003.[3]

The Seven Musts set out some broad principles that should underpin the WSIS deliberations if they were to include women and their gender concerns successfully:

- *An intersectional approach* that takes account of the diverse needs of women located in different geo-political, historical, class-based, racial, ethnic and other contexts.

- The need to *build on global consensus and reaffirm commitments made at previous UN conferences and summits*, in particular the World Conferences on Women in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995, as well as those focused on the rights of the child, on environment and development, human rights, and population and social development.

- *People-centred development* that embraces the principles of social justice and gender equality by addressing the needs of women and starting a process of redressing fundamental economic and socio-cultural gaps.

- *Respect for diversity* that also recognises the role and importance of traditional and Indigenous forms of media and communications, rather than a singular focus on digital technologies. The diversity of needs should be reflected in a diversity of solutions and strategies.

2　See the key recommendations of the WSIS Gender Caucus meeting in Bamako here: https://web.archive.org/web/20050817233921/http://www.genderwsis.org/uploads/media/KeyRecommendations_GenderCaucus.pdf

3　https://web.archive.org/web/20050419010148/http://ngo-wsis.genderit.org/csw/musthaves.htm

- *Peace and human development* where ICTs are harnessed in the service of peace and in opposition to wars.

- A *human rights framework,* meaning that instruments that ensure human rights for women, together with fundamental communication rights – such as freedom of expression, the right to information, and the right to communicate – should be reiterated in the final outcomes of the WSIS processes and summits.

- *Supporting local solutions*, given that the framework for ICT infrastructure development was seen as too focused on creating regulatory and fiscal incentives for investment in the global South by corporations based in developed countries. There was an urgent need to also encourage local low-cost and open-source solutions as well as South-South exchanges, and to encourage local content producers through public funding to support the prevention of "content dumping" from large entertainment corporations in the North.

APC was an initiating member of the WSIS NGO Gender Strategies Working Group and a member of the WSIS Gender Caucus. The networks formed and meetings held, especially at the regional level, motivated feminist activists in different fields to come together and discuss the relationship between ICTs and their work.[4] Engagement continued from 2002 to 2005.

Despite all the advocacy efforts, at the end of the WSIS process in 2005, Jac sm Kee, then part of APC's Women's Rights Programme, concluded:

> In terms of official documents produced, after a LOT of resources, effort and time spent [on] gathering information, sleepless nights, many cups of coffee and sticks of cigarettes (for some), talking, training, skills sharing, lobbying and writing, gender has a few specific mentions.[5]

The WSIS process was divided into two phases: Phase 1 in Geneva, Phase 2 in Tunis.[6] Four outcome documents were adopted – the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, and the Tunis Commitment and Agenda. The objective of the first phase was to develop and foster a clear statement of political will and take concrete steps to establish the foundations for an "Information Society" for all, reflecting different interests at stake. The second phase aimed at putting the Geneva Plan of Action into motion as well as finding solutions and reaching agreements in the fields of internet governance and financing mechanisms, and following up on the implementation of the Geneva and Tunis documents.

The Geneva Declaration of Principles of 2003 refers to the challenge posed for the information society to harness the potential of ICTs to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, and affirms:

> [The] development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.[7]

The accompanying Plan of Action established 11 Action Lines. Gender appears under three of the lines (C4, C7 and C8) which refer to equal access to ICT training and education; the adoption of gender equality principles for e-workers and e-employers; the strengthening of programmes focused on gender-sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education for all; and enhancing communication and media literacy for women.

The Tunis documents were more focused on addressing the digital divide, including through the development of indicators, and promoting women's participation in decision making.

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4   Kee, J. (2005, 7 December). Mirror image: Part IV - What about gender? *GenderIT.org*. https://genderit.org/index.php/feminist-talk/mirror-image-part-iv-what-about-gender

5   APC. (2005, 17 November). Overview of gender-related language in WSIS documents. https://www.apc.org/en/blog/overview-gender-related-language-wsis-documents

6   UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in two phases.

7   https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html

2003 documents – Geneva	
Geneva Declaration of Principles	2. Our challenge is to harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration, namely the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. We also reiterate our commitment to the achievement of sustainable development and agreed development goals, as contained in the Johannesburg Declaration and Plan of Implementation and the Monterrey Consensus, and other outcomes of relevant United Nations Summits.
	12. We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.

Geneva Plan of Action	C4. Capacity building
	11. Everyone should have the necessary skills to benefit fully from the Information Society. Therefore capacity building and ICT literacy are essential. ICTs can contribute to achieving universal education worldwide, through delivery of education and training of teachers, and offering improved conditions for lifelong learning, encompassing people that are outside the formal education process, and improving professional skills.
	   a. Develop domestic policies to ensure that ICTs are fully integrated in education and training at all levels, including in curriculum development, teacher training, institutional administration and management, and in support of the concept of lifelong learning.
	   [...]
	   g. Work on removing the gender barriers to ICT education and training and promoting equal training opportunities in ICT-related fields for women and girls. Early intervention programmes in science and technology should target young girls with the aim of increasing the number of women in ICT careers. Promote the exchange of best practices on the integration of gender perspectives in ICT education.

	C7. ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life 14. ICT applications can support sustainable development, in the fields of public administration, business, education and training, health, employment, environment, agriculture and science within the framework of national e-strategies. This would include actions within the following sectors: [...] 19. E-employment: a. Encourage the development of best practices for e-workers and e-employers built, at the national level, on principles of fairness and gender equality, respecting all relevant international norms.
	C8. Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content 23. Cultural and linguistic diversity, while stimulating respect for cultural identity, traditions and religions, is essential to the development of an Information Society based on the dialogue among cultures and regional and international cooperation. It is an important factor for sustainable development. [...] h. Strengthen programmes focused on gender-sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education for all and enhancing communication and media literacy for women with a view to building the capacity of girls and women to understand and to develop ICT content.

2005 documents – Tunis	
Tunis Commitment	23. We recognize that a gender divide exists as part of the digital divide in society and we reaffirm our commitment to women's empowerment and to a gender equality perspective, so that we can overcome this divide. We further acknowledge that the full participation of women in the Information Society is necessary to ensure the inclusiveness and respect for human rights within the Information Society. We encourage all stakeholders to support women's participation in decision-making processes and to contribute to shaping all spheres of the Information Society at international, regional and national levels.
Tunis Agenda	114. The development of ICT indicators is important for measuring the digital divide. We note the launch, in June 2004, of the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, and its efforts: [...] d. to develop specific gender-disaggregated indicators to measure the digital divide in its various dimensions.

Progress towards these commitments has been monitored since 2005 (as per paragraphs 109 and 110 of the Tunis Agenda) through the WSIS Forum.[8] The Tunis Agenda also created another space (as per paragraph 72), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), as a forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue. In both these spaces, gender discussions expanded slowly (for example, through the integration of gender in the IGF's Best Practices Forums and Dynamic Coalitions), in particular from 2015 onwards, with the linking of the WSIS Action Lines with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[9] Both the WSIS Forum and the IGF will continue to be held annually until 2025.

In 2015, a review of the implementation of the outcomes of WSIS (WSIS+10) was held by the UN General Assembly. After preparatory and negotiation meetings, the General Assembly adopted Resolution A/70/125 calling for close alignment between the WSIS process and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It highlighted the crosscutting contribution of ICTs to the SDGs and poverty eradication, noting that access to ICTs had also become a development indicator and aspiration in and of itself.

The 2015 WSIS+10 Resolution was organised under four thematic sections, addressing:

- ICTs for development
- Human rights in the information society
- Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
- Internet governance.

Gender, however, only explicitly appears in the section on ICTs for development, under a subsection on bridging the digital divides. In this subsection, the resolution recognises that ending the gender digital divide and the achievement of SDG 5 on gender are mutually reinforcing efforts. States commit to mainstreaming gender in the WSIS process, including through a new emphasis on gender in the implementation and monitoring of the action lines, with the support of relevant UN agencies, such as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, better known as UN Women.

Despite the silence in other sections of the WSIS+10 Resolution, gender has been gaining increasing attention in spaces discussing human rights, as well as cybersecurity and cybercrime.

Human rights discussions at the global level have been centred around the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), and its predecessor the Human Rights Commission, its Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, and the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In this realm, important highlights are the 2018 report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, which discusses the causes and consequences of online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective;[10] the 2019 report by the Special Rapporteur on the

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8 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=102&menu=3170

9 https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg

10 A/HRC/38/47

right to privacy, on privacy and technology from a gender perspective;[11] the 2019 report by the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, on integrating a gender perspective in implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which provide, under Principle 13, that business enterprises should ensure that new technologies such as artificial intelligence and automation do not have disproportionate adverse impacts on women's human rights;[12] the 2020 and 2022 reports by the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, on women's human rights in the changing world of work, which focuses on technological change and on girls' and young women's activism, addressing offline and online harassment and violence;[13] and the 2021 and 2022 reports on freedom of expression and gender justice and on gendered disinformation by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression.[14]

In 2018, the HRC also adopted a specific resolution on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts. It recognises growing trends in this regard, in particular discrimination, violence, intimidation or threats, harassment, stalking, bullying, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance and tracking, trafficking in persons, extortion, censorship, and the hacking of accounts or devices.[15] Other relevant HRC resolutions include those dedicated to the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet;[16] one on freedom of expression;[17] another on freedom of assembly and association;[18] and one on privacy,[19] in their more recent iterations. More recent General Assembly and HRC resolutions also express concern with the gender dimensions of online disinformation campaigns.[20]

The HRC has emphasised the need to ensure women's participation in the development of technology, its implementation and its governance.[21] The need for gender impact assessments of digital policies has also been stressed.[22]

Many cybersecurity threats are experienced differently by women and girls, men and boys, and people of non-binary gender identities.[23] This has also been a key discussion that organisations and activists seek to see recognised in global cybersecurity discussions.[24]

Important work has been carried out by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights' B-Tech Project in relation to the application of the UNGPs[25] in the tech sector. The B-Tech Project is, at the time of the drafting of this report, conducting efforts to provide guidance on the application of the UNGPs from a gender perspective. Applying the UNGPs framework in relation to the impact of technologies on women and girls can possibly assist in the identification of strategies to prevent risks and threats.

At the UN General Assembly's First Committee, two processes – the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) – have been exploring the question of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace since 2018.

The GGE has produced 13 norms, rules and principles for the responsible behaviour of states,[26] where a specific mention of human rights has been included. The accompanying explainer further details this specific provision, referring more broadly to differentiated impacts on specific groups, especially those in vulnerable situations, and then explicitly stating that the "[o]bservance of this norm can also contribute to promoting non-discrimination and narrowing the digital divide, including with regard to gender."

On 31 December 2020, the General Assembly adopted resolution 75/240 which established an Open-ended Working Group on ICT security (OEWG). The working group is expected to publish a final report in 2025. A previous resolution[27] had established a process which started in 2019 and culminated in a report published in 2021.[28] The

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11 A/HRC/40/63
12 A/HRC/41/43
13 A/HRC/50/25
14 A/76/258 and A/78/288
15 A/HRC/RES/38/5
16 A/HRC/RES/38/7
17 A/HRC/RES/50/15
18 A/HRC/RES/50/17
19 A/HRC/RES/48/4
20 A/RES/76/227 and A/HRC/RES/49/21, respectively.
21 A/HRC/RES/38/5

22 Ibid.
23 APC. (2023). *APC policy explainer: What is a gender approach to cybersecurity?* https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-what-gender-approach-cybersecurity
24 https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/framework-gender-cybersec
25 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Business/Intro_Guiding_PrinciplesBusinessHR.pdf
26 A/76/135
27 A/73/27
28 OEWG. (2021). *Final Substantive Report.* https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-report-A-AC.290-2021-CRP.2.pdf

report's introduction highlights the importance of reducing the "gender digital divide" and promotes the effective and meaningful participation and leadership of women in decision-making processes related to the use of ICTs in the context of international security. Its conclusions and recommendations affirm that a threat may be experienced differently and have different impacts on different entities and groups, including women. When stressing the relevance of capacity-building measures, it concludes that these should respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and be gender-sensitive, inclusive, universal and non-discriminatory. The hope is that the upcoming report to be released in 2025 will expand on these provisions.

Gender concerns have been raised in relation to setting norms and standards for combatting cybercrime, since they may be used as tools to legitimise the surveillance and censorship of historically excluded groups, and may heighten pre-existing structural inequalities.[29] In 2020, the General Assembly, through its Resolution 74/247, established an open-ended ad hoc intergovernmental committee of experts to elaborate a comprehensive international convention on countering the use of ICTs for criminal purposes. A lack of a proper gender lens throughout the negotiation process was a major concern for groups such as APC and its member Derechos Digitales.[30] The lack of proper human rights safeguards and the expansive nature of the criminal provisions were also considered a risk. After two years of negotiations, state representatives gathered in New York in 2024 for the concluding session of the ad hoc committee. Despite the many meetings which preceded it, fundamental disagreements among states led to the postponement of the decision about the need for a new treaty and its reach.[31]

Tech in gender: Slow progress

As mentioned above, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were critical documents at the global level addressing the impact of technology on women and girls. While the previous section paid attention to how gender concerns

were gradually foregrounded in digital governance and human rights spaces, this section will look at developments within gender-specific spaces, such the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action accounted for the role of technology across – as a 2022 paper published by UN Women put it – various critical "areas of concern and recognized that it is essential that women not only benefit from technology, but also participate in the process of developing it, from design to application, monitoring and evaluation."[32] However, the paper also notes:

> The Platform for Action frames technology issues from an education, employment and communication perspective. This focus is no longer reflective of the breadth of gender equality challenges and opportunities that the technological evolution has triggered since 1995.[33]

Beijing+25 had nevertheless further elaborated on the need for gender-led technological innovation and women's participation in the tech sector.[34]

Since Beijing in 1995, most developments to do with technology and gender have been observed at CSW sessions. In 2003 and 2017, specific provisions were included in its agreed conclusions and, after that, recurrent references have been reinforced and amplified. These have addressed issues such as online gender-based violence, including the need to establish comprehensive multisectoral services, programmes and responses that are adequately resourced; building the capacity of public officials in executive, legislative and judicial branches of government to adopt enhanced prevention measures; and the misuse of ICTs for sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and trafficking in women and girls. The 67th session held in 2023 was the first since the creation of the CSW in 1946 to have a specific focus on gender equality and digital technologies (the session was titled "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls").[35]

Before and during the session, APC stressed that the empowerment of women and girls cannot

29 APC. (2024). *APC policy explainer: Cybercrime and gender*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/policyexplainer_cybercrimegender.pdf

30 APC. (2023). *When protection becomes an excuse for criminalisation: Gender considerations on cybercrime frameworks*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/gender_considerations_on_cybercrime_0.pdf

31 https://www.eff.org/issues/un-cybercrime-treaty

32 Lee, J. (2022). *Normative frameworks on gender perspectives in technology and innovation*. UN Women. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Normative%20frameworks%20on%20gender%20perspectives%20in%20technology%20and%20innovation.pdf

33 Ibid.

34 E/CN.6/2020/3

35 https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw67-2023

be fulfilled if it does not include the full realisation of human rights, participation, security and the well-being of women and girls in all their diversity. APC further emphasised that historically unequal power relations between men and women and systemic gender-based discrimination must be recognised for broader, effective societal change. Other priority issues included freedom of expression, online gender-based violence, and bridging the gender digital divide.

CSW67's agreed conclusions[36] strengthened the integration of a gender perspective in the global normative frameworks for technology and innovation. This includes the renewal of a global commitment to achieving inclusive gender equality, despite significant pushback on fundamental issues in this agenda. Hivos has usefully summarised some of key gains in the agreed conclusions, and some highlights of its summary are quoted verbatim here:

> We are encouraged to see progress made in this year's agreed conclusions in recognizing:
>
> - The need to ensure that human rights are promoted, respected, and fulfilled in the conception, design, development, deployment, evaluation, and regulation of technologies and to ensure that they are subject to adequate safeguards in order to promote an open, secure, stable, and accessible and affordable information and communications technology environment for all women and girls.
> - Strong focus on policy actions for the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence, including gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technologies, with particular emphasis on victims and survivors-centered approaches.
> - The potential of technology to promote women's and girls' human rights, but also to perpetuate gender stereotypes and negative social norms, amplified and perpetuated through digital tools as well as gender bias in technology, including artificial intelligence.
> - The critical role digital platforms can play as spaces where all women can advocate, mobilize and participate fully, equally, and meaningfully in public life.
>
> - The importance of labor rights in addressing the challenges of technological change in the world of work. The conclusions also recognize the importance of addressing occupational segregation and the reality that women are more likely to lose jobs because of automation and digitalization. These barriers to women's economic justice have not been adequately addressed in previous CSWs.
> - The addition of 'non-consensual' when speaking of outlawing the sharing of sexual or otherwise explicit materials, which reflects the rights of sex workers while safeguarding victims of deep fakes or sextortion, both examples of gender-based violence facilitated by the use of technology, specific to the priority theme of this year's CSW.

Furthermore, the agreed conclusions also acknowledged:

> - That multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization are obstacles to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age.
> - The important role of digital health including digital health technologies, digital tools, telemedicine and mobile health for ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, as well as the need to protect personal information.
> - That there is a pressing need to address the major impediments that developing countries and small island developing states face in accessing and using new technologies, stressing the need to close the digital divides, both between and within countries, including the rural-urban, youth-older persons and gender digital divides.[37]

These provisions represent important, positive developments. However, other issues such as those pertaining to the protection of LGBTQIA+ people's rights online, as well as those concerning the environmental impact of technological progress (and

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36 https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=E/CN.6/2023/L.3&Lang=E

37 Hivos. (2023, 23 March). UN Commission on the Status of Women closes with renewed commitment to gender equality. https://hivos.org/un-commission-on-the-status-of-women-closes-with-renewed-commitment-to-gender-equality

its gendered effects), did not make it into the final draft, despite advocacy by different gender groups.

Another concern has been the diversity of participation in the CSW, as in other gender and digital global governance spaces. As highlighted by Whose Knowledge?, the Numun Fund and APC:

> CSW67 convened organisations from different parts of the world but continued to carry many contradictions and power imbalances present on its global stage. Being held in the United States, the CSW brings together those who manage to obtain a visa and navigate the strict entry policies of the US, as well as access the funding necessary to join the discussions and participate in person. This affects many under-resourced collectives in the Larger World, especially those that suffer the harshest consequences of multiple/intersecting systems of oppression and injustice.[38]

The Global Digital Compact

In September 2021, responding to a request from the General Assembly in a 75th session declaration,[39] the Secretary-General released his *Our Common Agenda* report.[40] In *Our Common Agenda*, he proposes a Global Digital Compact (GDC) to be agreed at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 through a technology track involving all stakeholders.

The preparatory work around the GDC has been considered confusing and obscure, with civil society groups calling for increased clarity in relation to both the process that would lead to the adoption of the GDC, as well as its expected content.

Taking advantage of the momentum created around CSW67, a coalition of civil society organisations joined forces to raise gender concerns as a central element of the GDC, calling for feminist principles to guide the negotiations and drafting efforts. APC is a founding and leading member of this coalition. Discussions organised to map expectations in relation to the GDC and the Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact[41] were launched in Kyoto, Japan, in 2023 during the 18th annual meeting of the IGF.

The coalition has also been calling for a stand-alone principle on gender to be included in the GDC text.

Conclusion and action steps

At the time of the drafting of this report, the zero draft of the GDC has just been released. An important victory has been the inclusion of the stand-alone principle on gender. However, an initial assessment of the document shows it has not properly mainstreamed the principle through specific gender provisions in other sections of the draft, particularly those referring to artificial intelligence, data governance and the digital economy. The upcoming months will be critical to achieve a GDC that ensures that the governance, development and use of technology are inclusive and benefit women and girls and gender-diverse people around the world.

APC and other civil society groups have also called for the GDC to build on and promote concrete links with existing global processes that deal with the internet and digital technologies, and not to put at risk historical gains in these processes, including in the realm of gender and human rights.

One of these is WSIS. Mobilisation around the WSIS review will need further collaboration between gender and digital rights groups, ensuring that global digital governance expands into a truly representative multistakeholder process. The feminist principles created for the GDC will also provide a gender framework for debate in the review.

In the face of the past 30 years of digital transformation, we find ourselves at a critical moment. With the GDC and the WSIS+20 review, we have concrete opportunities to shape and co-create a digital space that is inclusive and safe for all, but in particular for those who have been pushed to the margins, and will continue to be if we do not approach digital governance with the goal of increasing people's agency and autonomy, rights and capabilities. At least the following should be priorities for civil society organisations:

- Ensure that the key historical gains with respect to gender rights that have been articulated in this report are properly represented, reinforced and, possibly, expanded in the GDC and in the WSIS+20 review.

- Adopt an intersectional approach that recognises the reinforcing layers of discrimination and inequality that affect women and gender-diverse people's relationship with digital technologies, intensifying risks and harms and disproportionately allocating benefits.

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38 Whose Knowledge? (2023, 30 March). Protest+power: centering feminist technology at CSW67. https://whoseknowledge.org/centering-feminist-technology-csw67

39 A/RES/75/1

40 https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report

41 https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/feminist_principles-gdc-september2023.pdf

- Form coalitions and alliances with feminist organisations, or digital rights organisations focusing on gender and sexual rights, to amplify the voice of gender rights actors in these processes and discussions.
- Be careful of a token representation of gender and sexual rights concerns in documents emerging from these discussions, in particular outcomes that do not reflect a systemic gender analysis across all aspects of digital technologies, including their production, use and governance.
- Use the Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact as a tool to assess and evaluate draft documents that emerge from these processes from a gender perspective.

The Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact

Each of these principles includes important explanatory text that can be read online.[1]

1. Ensure concrete commitments to protect the digital rights of women and girls and marginalised groups

Advance concrete commitments to assure a digital future grounded on existing human rights law and standards for gender-just societies and economies in which States and private sector protect, respect and promote the human rights of women and girls in all their diversity and people facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes recourse for violations of human rights in the digital sphere, and the adoption of an intersectional approach when interpreting human rights that considers gender alongside race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, (dis)ability and any other relevant factor, so as to address any gendered discrimination and inequality.

2. Guarantee freedom from technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Include provisions for States to pass legislation that protects the right to freedom from technology facilitated gender-based violence. This would include measures for prevention and survivor-centred responses including swift and meaningful redress for survivors, safe and ethical technology and transparent and responsive processes for improving technology in response to technical and social changes. Crucially, States must insist that technology companies practise transparency by disclosing their actions, methods, and motivations, and enforce accountability for their conduct.

3. Promote universal rights to freedom of expression, privacy, peaceful assembly, and participation of women and girls in all their diversity in all aspects of life.

Promote the full realisation of universal rights to freedom of expression and information, to freedom of peaceful assembly and association including the freedom to protest and organise, as well as to full participation in and enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political life. This includes protection of the right to encryption and online anonymity, and the prohibition of Internet disruptions that do not comply with international human rights standards.

4. Ensure universal, affordable, accessible, and safe internet access for all.

Promote universal, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful1 and equal access to the Internet for women and girls in all their diversity and people of diverse genders, including those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes the right of people with disabilities to receive and impart information and ideas

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1 https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/feminist_principles-gdc-september2023.pdf

through safe, accessible and affordable formats and technologies, as well as the right to create, share and engage with information in their own language.

5. Demand strict action against harmful surveillance applications and high-risk AI systems.

Expressly ban surveillance applications that cannot be operated in compliance with international human rights law and impose moratoriums on the sale and use of AI systems that carry a high risk for the enjoyment of human rights, unless and until adequate safeguards to protect human rights are in place.

6. Expand women's participation and leadership in the technology sector and digital policymaking.

Include measures to increase the participation and representation of women in all their diversity across all levels of the technology sector including in the design, leadership and decision-making processes at national and international levels on digital technology governance, infrastructure planning and regulation, and technology development. These measures should include the promotion and support of women and girls studying and working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), facilitating women's involvement in democratic processes, and strengthening women's rights movements and young women-led organisations to participate in decision making and policy making processes.

7. Prioritise strategies that reduce the environmental impact of new technologies.

Climate change is a global phenomenon that impacts all people. However, the consequences of climate change are not experienced evenly, and women in developing countries are likely to be disproportionately affected. In light of the pressing contemporary environmental challenges that endanger global populations, particularly women and girls, States must take action to reduce the energy consumption of the Internet and digital technologies and minimise harm from the extraction of natural resources to fuel new technologies.

8. Implement measures for states and transnational corporations to ensure data privacy, governance, and consent.

Include measures for states and transnational corporations to protect the right to privacy and protection and data governance systems to ensure that women and girls in all their diversity are able to exercise full control and provide ongoing and informed consent over their personal data and information online at all levels.

9. Adopt Equality-by-Design principles and a human-rights based approach throughout all phases of digital technology development.

Make sure that a human-rights based approach and Equality-by-design principles,[2] including transparency and human rights and gender rights impact assessments, are incorporated into the development of any algorithmic decision-making systems or digital technologies prior to deployment. And are not tested without these principles, to prevent discrimination and harmful biases being amplified and/or perpetuated.

10. Re-shape the participation and role of women in accessing and using digital technology [and]address its potential impacts on labour and entrepreneurship.

Safeguards and standards developed in consultation across global civil society, women's rights and feminist organisations, government, and private sector, with those most harmed leading the design, should be adopted to ensure that gender stereotyping and discriminatory biases are not translated into AI systems. This should include, at a minimum, transparency in relation to data sets, their sources and uses, and applied algorithms.

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2   Equality by Design is an approach to system design which requires and enables the potential equality impacts of an algorithmic system to be identified, assessed and addressed as an integral part of the development process. See: Equal Rights Trust. (2023). *Principles on Equality by Design in Algorithmic Decision-Making*. https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Principles%20on%20Equality%20by%20Design%20in%20Algorithmic%20Decision%20Making_0.pdf

WSIS+20: REIMAGINING HORIZONS OF DIGNITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a "common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society."

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) considers the importance of WSIS as an inclusive policy and governance mechanism, and what, from a civil society perspective, needs to change for it to meet the challenges of today and to meaningfully shape our digital future.

Expert reports consider issues such as the importance of the historical legacy of WSIS, the failing multistakeholder system and how it can be revived, financing mechanisms for local access, the digital inequality paradox, why a digital justice framing matters in the context of mass digitalisation, and feminist priorities in internet governance. While this edition of GISWatch asks: "How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?" it carries lessons for other digital governance processes such as the Global Digital Compact and NETmundial+10.

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