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Item 5 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Parallel sessions

Digital technical and vocational education and training: enhancing the skills of women and girls across Africa

Concept note

I. Context

1. The fifth session of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender will be held on 2 and 3 November 2023 under the theme "Building new social contracts in Africa: choices to fulfil development aspirations".

2. Within the context of the fifth session, a number of parallel sessions will be convened, including a parallel session on the topic "Digital technical and vocational education and training: enhancing the skills of women and girls across Africa".

II. Background

3. In line with the theme for the fifth session of the Committee, this parallel session will focus on the topic "Digital technical and vocational education and training: enhancing the skills of women and girls across Africa" as a pathway to promoting gender equality and achieving women's empowerment. Building on a parallel session from the fourth session of the Committee, the focus of which was the emerging skills required for the productive jobs of the future, the opportunities that women and girls would have to acquire such skills and the challenges they would face in doing so, ECA has developed a digital skills enhancement programme to address the concerns and opportunities and pursue the work on gender and digitalization.

4. Women and girls often face disproportionate online violence and harassment, including receiving explicit messages, experiencing cyberstalking[1] and having their privacy violated. These safety and security concerns are among

* E/ECA/CSPPG/5/1.

[1] EQUALS Skills Coalition and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *I'd Blush If I Could: Closing Gender Divides in Digital Skills through Education* (2019); Winifred R. Poster, "Cybersecurity needs women", Comment, *Nature*, 26 March 2018; European Institute for Gender Equality, Cyber Violence against Women and Girls. Vilnius, EIGE.

the key barriers limiting women's access and use of digital services.[2] Online harassment can have devastating offline consequences on both the physical and mental health of women, with online violence linked to depression and even self-harm.[3] This pushes women and girls further away from the benefits of technology and digitalization, excludes them from accessing and using digital technologies and further marginalizes them, thus enlarging the gender digital divide. Online safety therefore needs to be managed to improve the risk-benefit ratio for women and girls.

5. In 2023, Interpol reported that 83 per cent of respondents to a 2022 survey on the top crime threats in Africa reported phishing and online scams as the type of crime posing the greatest threat on the continent. [4] Women and children are especially at risk online owing to existing vulnerabilities.

6. Of even greater concern is the use of the Internet to facilitate child trafficking and other forms of exploitation. For example, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child trafficking in the world, with the Internet having become a key tool for traffickers.[5] Certain groups of women, such as those with disabilities and those who belong to marginalized and minority groups, are more likely to be the targets of online violence and harassment.[6] Given that those groups of women are often the least computer literate, providing them with training in online safety and security is critical to mitigating the risks they face in that regard.

7. Digital technology has opened more income opportunities for informal and low-skilled workers. This was particularly true during the height of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, when physical access to markets was restricted in many countries. Digital platforms enable people to expand their reach beyond specific locations and tap into broader markets. This is aided by the fact that, in many African countries, close to 99 per cent of the population lives in areas that are covered by a mobile cellular signal.[7] At a basic level, people with smartphones are increasingly using free social media platforms to market and sell their products and messaging applications to manage orders. These micro-entrepreneurs can sell a variety of goods and services through the platforms, especially if they use digital marketing practices through the various free and low-cost tools that are available.

8. Beyond information and trade, the digital world is widely used for education and entertainment. It has been estimated that about 80 per cent of all Internet traffic relates to videos, social networking and gaming. Monthly global data traffic is expected to surge from 230 exabytes in 2020 to 780 exabytes by 2026.[8] For example, the rise of a self-sustaining popular film industry in Africa (widely referred to as "Nollywood") has been facilitated by affordable technologies such as digital cameras and desktop editing for filmmaking. This film industry has expanded from Ghana and Nigeria to the entire continent.[9]

[2] GSMA, *Bridging the Gender Gap: Mobile Access and Usage in Low and Middle-income Countries* (2015).

[3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being* (Paris, Programme for International Student Assessment and OECD Publishing, 2017).

[4] International Criminal Police Organization, "Financial and cybercrimes top global police concerns, says new INTERPOL report", 19 October 2022.

[5] United Nations Children's Fund, *Situation Analysis of Children in Nigeria: Ensuring Equitable and Sustainable Realization of Child Rights in Nigeria* (Lagos, 2022).

[6] A/HRC/38/47.

[7] ITU, World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database. Available at www.itu.int/itu-d/sites/statistics/.

[8] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Digital Economy Report 2021: Cross-border Data Flows and Development: For Whom the Data Flow* (Geneva, United Nations, 2021), p. 17.

[9] Lizelle Bisschoff, "The future is digital: an introduction to African digital arts", *Critical African Studies*, vol. 9, No. 3: African Digital Arts, 2017.

The industry is estimated to generate $590 million annually,[10] with further growth anticipated.

9. The rise of social media has opened new revenue opportunities for people without extensive technical skills. “Social-media influencer” is now a full-time job for some people. On one social media site, nano-influencers (those having fewer than 1,000 followers) earn around $10–$100 per post, while mega-influencers (those having more than 1 million followers) earn more than $10,000 per post.[11] Companies pay to place advertisements on social media websites, and social-media influencers in many African countries now have access to online platforms that allow them to monetize their content thanks to advertisements played during their videos. The basic premise of this business model is that the more followers an influencer has, the greater access advertisers have to their potential market.

10. The global social media influencer market is growing, with its value having increased from $1.7 billion in 2016 to an estimated $21.1 billion in 2023.[12] As the influencer market has grown, so has the number of influencer marketing companies. There are now estimated to be 18,900 influencer marketing-related businesses worldwide.[13] Empowering women to become digital content creators will add value to the digital space by reducing bias and making the service more inclusive for women. More important, it will open up new income streams for women to tap into through self-sustaining job creation.

11. Data on the use of social media in various countries illustrate the potential reach of social media. In South Africa, there are more than 30 million active users,[14] which accounts for almost half the country’s population. In 2022, an estimated 66.7 per cent of the content shared on social media in South Africa was locally relevant[15]. In Nigeria, at the end of 2022 Facebook was used by an estimated 47 per cent of the population, Twitter by 22 per cent, Pinterest by 7 per cent, LinkedIn by 0.5 per cent, and Instagram by 16 per cent.[16] In Tunisia, 90 per cent used Facebook, 4 per cent Twitter, 3 per cent YouTube and 2 per cent Instagram[17]. In Mauritius, 80 per cent used Facebook, while only 5 per cent used Pinterest and 6 per cent Instagram.[18]

12. The growth in the use of the Internet and social media provides significant opportunities for women to earn money, as advertisers seek new markets in Africa. In 2022, spending on digital advertising reached 60 per cent of total global spending on media advertising.[19] Equipping women and girls to use the platforms and to begin producing their own online digital content will allow them to receive advertising revenue and other revenue. It will also open

[10] Rebecca Moudio, “Nigeria’s film industry: a potential gold mine?”, Africa Renewal, May 2013. See www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/may-2013/nigeria%E2%80%99s-film-industry-potential-gold-mine.

[11] Werner Geyser, “Influencer rates: how much do influencers really cost in 2023?”, Influencer Marketing Hub, 19 December 2022.

[12] Werner Geyser, “The state of influencer marketing 2023: benchmark report”, Influencer Marketing Hub, 7 February 2023.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Muhammad Asmal (with assistance from artificial intelligence), “Social media stats in South Africa in 2022”, Dezign-It, 30 September 2022. Available at: https://dezignit.co.za/social-media-stats-in-south-africa/.

[15] GSMA. “Index Score 2022”, GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index. Available at: www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/index.html#year=2022&zoneIsocode=ZAF&analysisView=ZAF (accessed on 11 August 2023).

[16] Statcounter Global Stats, “Social media stats in Nigeria: Jan - Dec 2022”. Available at https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/nigeria/2022.

[17] Statcounter Global Stats, “Social media stats in Tunisia: Jan - Dec 2022”. Available at https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/tunisia/2022.

[18] Statcounter Global Stats, “Social Media Stats in Mauritius: Jan - Dec 2022”. Available at https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/mauritius/2022.

[19] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Digital Economy Report 2021: *Cross-border Data Flows and Development: For Whom the Data Flow* (Geneva, United Nations, 2021).

a promising avenue for artistic expression through digitalization. The training should also make women and girls cognisant of the impact their content has on society, the safety precautions they need to consider, and the way in which they can achieve positive gendered outcomes.

13. ECA took these emerging trends and opportunities into account and consulted its members and project country experts before developing a capacity-development programme to leverage digital transformation for women's economic empowerment that features five pillars: technologies and skills related to online safety and security; digital marketing; online content creation; e-commerce and digital finance; and space science and satellite imagery. The programme will provide an opportunity to address issues and examine real-world applications relating to safe online spaces for women; advocacy and outreach; the digital economy and influencer markets; information streams, trade platforms and online transactions; and agriculture and climate resilience.

14. ECA has held inception meetings on capacity-development modalities for phase 1 of the project, which is focused on the first three of the five pillars listed above. ECA has also conducted national training workshops in Lesotho, Seychelles, South Africa and Tunisia and plans to conduct others in project countries. Given the overwhelming response to the project, the vast number of requests made for support and the oversubscription of workshops for training of trainers, further training opportunities will need to be provided to meet the demand.

III. Objectives

15. The objectives of the parallel session are as follows:

(a) Provide ECA members with a summary of how ECA is enhancing the digital skills of women and girls across Africa;

(b) Explain which areas of digitalization have been identified as key for the digital empowerment of women through the training of trainers;

(c) Explain the challenges faced in developing a critical mass of women in technology who can act as trainers to disseminate and replicate such training to achieve gender equality;

(d) Seek feedback and requests from countries wishing to join the programme or to help to further shape the focus of training to achieve women's economic empowerment;

(e) Introduce the research paper drafted by ECA on gender and digitalization and the five-pillar capacity-development programme for women's economic empowerment;

(f) Discuss the design, delivery, modalities and impact of the five-pillar programme and, as an outcome of the meeting, endorse it as a regional model;

(g) Discuss complementary national initiatives and regional and international partnerships;

(h) Discuss the role of digitalization in achieving economic empowerment for women and girls in Africa;

(i) Facilitate feedback and recommendations – which will inform the work of subprogramme 6 in 2023 and beyond – on how ECA can better support its members in addressing gender and digitalization, the potential gender skills gap in the fourth industrial revolution, and the cultural, social and institutional barriers that women and girls face to education and training in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

IV. Expected outcomes

16. The following outcomes are expected from the parallel session:

(a) A deeper understanding of the role of digital technical and vocational education and training in the attainment of gender equality and women's empowerment and in accelerating a digital and economic transformation in Africa;

(b) The identification of emerging opportunities to enhance the digital skills of women and girls and complementary national initiatives and global and regional partnerships;

(c) Enhanced knowledge of policy interventions to create an enabling environment for women and girls to excel in digitalization, thus enabling them to leverage online tools and equipping them with labour skills for the future.

V. Format

17. The parallel session will be held in a break-out format during the fifth session of the Committee, as indicated in the provisional agenda. A thematic presentation will be made by the Committee secretariat, which will be followed by discussions in which relevant experts will make comments, draw conclusions and propose recommendations.

VI. Documentation

18. The parallel session will be informed by research and analysis provided in relevant publications, technical material, knowledge products and presentations. The material will be shared with participants online in advance.

VII. Participation

19. Participants in the parallel session will include experts from ministries responsible for science and technology, gender, higher education and training, and employment and industry.

20. The Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division serves as the convener of the session and the secretariat of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender.

VIII. Language

21. The parallel session will be conducted in English and French. Simultaneous interpretation will be provided.