Equal Access to Digital Skills Drives Economic Growth

There is a clear intersection between internet access, adequate broadband infrastructure and the trajectory of economic growth. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have allowed us to establish creative links between human beings, machines and the internet through the introduction of new digital business trends. The Internet of Things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI), epitomize this trend. Both allow machines to carry out human-like actions such as learning, performing, understanding and interacting with us humans and other machines within the process of ongoing automation.

Challenges with Inclusion

- **Many** women and girls are facing enormous structural barriers in the digital world. Despite overall improvements in access levels for the ICT sector, studies show that the gender digital divide prevails irrespective of country, economic growth or income level.
- **Access** to hardware remains a key intersectional issue: women and men as well as girls and boys are not equal when it comes to the technology needed to go online. It is affected by matters such as disabilities, access to citizenship, sexual orientation or refugee and migrant worker status. Geographical locations also play a major role.
- **Quality** internet and broadband access are concentrated in the cities, affluent suburbs, and privileged regions in the Arab world. It is much easier for men to escape the digital divide through migration from rural areas to cities with quality internet and broadband connection.
- **The COVID-19** pandemic has also uncovered new inequalities not only in the developing world of the Global South, but also in parts of the industrialized and affluent countries of the Global North.
- **The rapid** shift to online education & training, office work, marketing, sales, delivery, and even industrial production globally has highlighted two important patterns:
    1) Access to quality broadband infrastructure is still unfairly benefiting the male population.
    2) Investments in hardware, such as quality workstations and internet access, still focus primarily on the needs of men.

Since the beginning of industrialization, there has been a historical feminist and unionist struggle against the gender gap, particularly in wages and career advancement. In order to close the gender digital divide, it will be necessary to build on previous feminist successes and experiences to deal with the challenges of the future.

Facts and Figures

- **According** to an International Telecommunication Union (ITU) study, 52 per cent of the total global female population is still not using the internet, compared to 42 per cent of all men; this problem is even more pronounced in developing countries.

- **Internet** browsing rates for males (47.7%) are higher than females (39.4%) in the Arab region due to socioeconomic factors such as income, social norms and lack of awareness.

- **These** rates vary from one country to another across the region with some having a much wider gender gap than others. Based on a brief by UN and ESCWA for instance, 98.3 per cent of men in Iraq have access to the internet compared with only 51.2 per cent of women.

- **Women** tend to remain in the underserviced countryside. Access to internet within the home is skewed towards male users of working age, thus disadvantaging women, youth and the elderly.

- **The Groupe** Speciale Mobile (GSM) Association report in 2019 mentions that by 2025, the estimated number of the total smartphone connections in the MENA region is expected to reach 500 million. This can allow the creation of a broad range of digital services.

- **Studies** show that mobile money services not only increase female access to services like education and health care but also foster inclusion, in particular among female domestic workers and refugees in the MENA region.

- **Cybersecurity** and safety measures should be taken while working online, this includes tips like using a strong password, avoiding clicking on phishing links, or using public Wi-Fi.