



International Women's Day

Joint Statement of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network

8 March 2023

Digital gender gap is a barrier to women's full participation in society

London, 8 March 2023: On this International Women's Day, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network call upon Commonwealth Member States to bridge the digital gender gap and ensure that women across the Commonwealth are able to reap the benefits of digital technologies.

The theme for International Women's Day this year, 'DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality', draws attention to the role of the digital gender gap in exacerbating socio-economic inequality across the globe.

With digitalisation affecting every aspect of our lives, access to the internet and connectivity are essential to ensure equal opportunities for all. Yet, studies show that [37 percent of women](#) around the world do not use the internet. Further, compared to men, 239 million fewer women have access to the internet.

According to the World Economic Forum, the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields will account for [75 percent of jobs by 2050](#). However, the digital gender gap puts women in a position of disadvantage, when it comes to being adequately skilled for jobs in these areas.

Even when women have access to the internet, they are likely to be wary of using it optimally, for fear of online abuse. A recent study found that [38 percent of female users](#) personally

experienced violence online, while 85 percent reported witnessing online violence against other women. Faced with online violence, 9 out of 10 women limited their online activity.

The exclusion of women from the digital sphere [caused an estimated loss of \\$1 trillion](#) to the Gross Domestic Product of low-and-middle income countries over the last decade. If the digital gender gap is not addressed, this loss will likely increase to \$1.5 trillion by 2025.

Digital exclusion also has serious implications for women living under conditions of contemporary forms of slavery, including their inability to use the internet and online technologies for a better life. While there is limited research on the use of digital technologies by victims or survivors of contemporary forms of slavery, [studies have shown](#) that such technologies enable survivors to seek help to deal with their experiences of trafficking. Further, a lack of digital skills or access to online services can undermine survivors' recovery.

In 2016, the UN General Assembly declared access to internet a basic human right, and stressed the importance of “empowering all women and girls by enhancing their access to information and communications technology, promoting digital literacy and the participation of women and girls in education and training on information and communications technology, and encouraging women and girls to embark on careers in the sciences and information and communications technology”.

Yet, the lack of equal access to the internet remains a key human rights concern in several countries, [research](#) by the Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project at the University of Sussex shows.

Any strategy to address the digital gender gap requires not only that women have equal access to the internet and online services, but feel safe and confident while using these services. A [recent Commonwealth report on online violence against women](#) in the Pacific, calls for looking beyond direct perpetrators and enacting laws that require bystanders to report abuse or violence against women. Governments must come up with similar innovative solutions to address these concerns.

We urge member states to work with civil society organisations to identify innovative solutions that enable more women to gain the education and digital skills required for careers in STEM areas, and provide such solutions with adequate funds. A digitally inclusive Commonwealth will be better equipped to attain the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

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