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# policyUPDATE

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## Girls in ICT Day

### What is Girls in ICT Day?

International Girls in ICT Day<sup>1</sup> is an initiative which aims to create a global environment that empowers and encourages girls and young women to consider careers in the growing field of information and communication technologies (ICTs)<sup>2</sup>. It is celebrated on the 4th Thursday in April every year and is a chance to recognise the achievements of girls and women in ICT, promote greater access to ICT and advocate for the benefits it can bring economically and socially.

The ICT sector is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, and the roles in it are among the highest-paid jobs, but not all the population is benefitting. It is well-documented that women's basic capabilities in engineering and technology are equal to men's. In countries where gender discrimination is relatively low, girls have the same performance level in mathematics as boys. It is cultural, sociological, economic and other factors that can have a negative impact on women's involvement in ICT.



*"The technology industry has never been more dynamic or more exciting. Now, more than ever, we need to be doing all we can to build the diverse talent pipeline that will lead our industry into the future."*

– CHUCK ROBBINS, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,  
WORLDWIDE SALES, CISCO

1. Girls in ICT Day is backed by all ITU Member States in ITU Plenipotentiary Resolution 70 (Rev. Busan 2014).

2. ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as video-conferencing and distance learning.

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# What are the benefits of greater gender equality in ICT?

One resource that liberates people from poverty and empowers them is knowledge. Knowledge and its widespread dissemination in a usable form are therefore essential to initiate the change process for women's development<sup>i</sup>. The Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030, finalised and adopted in September 2015, is the global initiative to tackle global poverty, addressing inequality and poverty indicators on 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4, Quality Education, and Goal 5, Gender Equality, together emphasise the importance of lifelong access to quality education for all. Greater access to education through ICTs can extend the reach and possibilities of formal and informal education. ICT integration can improve functionality, for example by enriching lesson content, and by providing real research options in conventional class settings. Innovative education initiatives, for example the Literacy Promotion through Mobile Phones project in Pakistan<sup>ii</sup>, teaching literacy through mobile learning, have demonstrated a greater retention of literacy through continued skill use.

Combining access to ICTs for women with other skills training can improve women's participation in the social sphere. As better-informed citizens, women are able to participate more fully politically. Confidence gained through digital literacy encourages interaction with government, sharing of data, encouraging greater transparency.

Better accountability and more effective service delivery can ensue<sup>iii</sup>.

Evidence clearly indicates that women are under-represented in ICT sector employment. Women account for less than 20% of ICT specialists<sup>iv</sup>. At the global level women account for 30% of operations technicians, only 15% of managers and a mere 11% of strategy and planning professionals in the ICT sector. Yet the opportunities in ICT are plentiful. The demand for people with engineering and technology qualifications is high. There are a great variety of roles available, and pay and prospects are attractive, especially compared to female-dominated careers.

Young people can leverage the transformative power of ICTs when they have access to ICTs and are equipped with a range of digital skills, including coding. ICTs can reduce youth unemployment and promote social and economic development. For this to happen, school connectivity, early digital literacy skills, and ICT-enabled employment opportunities for youth need to be emphasised, including encouraging more young women and girls to prepare for and enter ICT careers. Encouraging women and girls to pursue ICT careers fosters a more dynamic technology sector, with extensive benefits for companies. A more gender-balanced workforce reflects the customer base more accurately, enhances productivity and innovation and leads to better financial results.



## Difficulties and barriers to girls and women in ICT

In conservative societies women have been traditionally isolated from the mainstream economy and the global pool of information and knowledge because of societal, cultural and market constraints. Women's lack of empowerment compared to men is exacerbated by exclusion from knowledge. There is an increasing amount of evidence substantiating that societies that discriminate by gender pay a high price in terms of their ability to develop and to reduce poverty<sup>v</sup>.

As a communication device, the mobile phone brings women into the public sphere, even if it is a small, local social network at the outset. Yet this cultural shift can be potentially threatening to men and male-dominated institutions<sup>vi</sup>. As a consequence, a serious barrier to women's use of ICTs is the policing and control by male relatives and community members, especially with respect to women's use of mobile phones. For example, in India caste *panchayats* in Uttar Pradesh – known for their regressive gender politics –

*"Today the gender pay gap is equivalent to women working 59 days a year for free, and ICT is one way to catch up. Women in the ICT sector earn an average of 9% more than women in similar positions in other sectors."*

- VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, NEELIE KROES

## Difficulties and barriers to girls and women in ICT

(continued)

have banned mobile phone use for unmarried women as they feel phones encourage 'loose' conduct<sup>vii</sup>. Research from Zambia reveals that women have been threatened, intimidated and even beaten by spouses who seek to control when and where they use their mobile phones<sup>viii</sup>.

Similarly, the Internet is often portrayed as a 'corrupting' influence on women in some developing countries<sup>ix</sup>.

Mistrust of the internet and related technology can be managed through community engagement and education on the advantages of access to and use of ICTs, raising awareness of potential threats and how to mitigate them. This involves training on responsible use and putting in place an online protection framework to anticipate and manage any such problem.



## How to address the barriers to girls and women in ICT?

It must be recognised that bridging the gender gap in ICT involves highlighting the critical role of multilateral, multistakeholder and multisector partnerships, and identifying the barriers to long-term, senior leadership for women ICT professionals (including school/workplace environment and conditions). Commitment from those at the top levels of education and industry is essential to drive change. The social pressures that result in stereotypical careers choices need to be discussed and addressed early on in the educational cycle.

## Communication on the prospects in ICT

Communication needs to focus on parents and other individuals who are significant influencers. Information about the demand for ICT skills and qualifications, particularly the commercial value of mathematics and science qualifications, needs to be communicated so that young people and their parents understand that taking these subjects will improve future job prospects. For example, many do not understand that taking science at school can lead to an exciting career in broadcast engineering or robotics. Diverse personal skills as well as technical knowhow are needed for innovation and creativity within the sector. Some examples of less well-known areas in ICT are e-learning developers, who work with others to develop courses that can be studied online; forensic computer analysts, investigating cybercrime; and computer games testers and developers.

### Attracting and retaining women in ICT

Girls and young women at critical decision-making points of their lives and careers need to be offered opportunities and encouragement to consider ICT, and to remain in the field. They need to be:

- given a clear picture of what the educational and training process could look like – do not assume that all students have the same background knowledge
  - informed by demonstration that there are vocational routes leading to technician and apprenticeship jobs as a positive alternative or stepping stone into higher education.
  - given role models - of professional women and their career trajectory
  - informed by a communications strategy that gives positive messaging about the rewarding careers available in this sector
  - offered support and mentoring
- In addition:
- all diversity should be addressed - not just girls but disabled people and ethnic minorities
  - talented individuals once recruited should be retained with emphasis on recognition and reward for quality

## How can NFAs become involved in Girls in ICT Day?

All national federations and associations (NFAs), NFA branches and members can contribute by holding events tailored to their local context and means. The main goal is to make girls and young women aware of the vast possibilities offered by ICTs and give them the confidence to pursue ICT studies and careers. In addition to focusing on girls, the Girls in ICT Day aims to raise awareness among parents, teachers and other influencers in girls' lives.

### Some messages to communicate on Girls in ICT Day

- emphasise the values and benefits which girls (and their families) care about.
- emphasise the different 'types of people' that are successful in a range of ICT careers.
- provide opportunities to meet a range of young female role models from similar backgrounds (high-flying role models can sometimes be daunting).
- offer workplace experience / taster days – particularly girls-only events.
- if you work in an ICT-related field - Take a Girl to Work Day

### Advocacy initiatives can focus on:

- more investment in girls and women for ICTs
- gender disaggregated data to better understand the elements of gender inequality in this sector
- encouraging a human rights-based approach to ICT provision in education and as a source of knowledge.

*"I think it's very important to get more women into computing. My slogan is: Computing is too important to be left to men."*

- KAREN SPÄRCK JONES, PROFESSOR OF COMPUTERS AND INFORMATION AT CAMBRIDGE COMPUTER LABORATORY 1935-2007

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