Digital revolution? Not without girls

International Day of the Girl Child – 11th October 2021

"If girls learn to create a website or use social media, they can share their experience, and learn from others", points out Houda, a 19-year-old French student who is reading for a degree in computer science.[1]

"When I told my friends, I was going to study computer science [in university], they all warned me it was a male-dominated field," Houda explains.[2] Today, she is the only girl out of 15 students in her university cohort. Houda believes that digital skills can play an essential role in broadening the knowledge and widening the horizons of adolescents, and girls in particular, by connecting them to the outside world.

Houda has begun teaching programming skills to family and friends in her community, including her two little brothers. She hopes to pursue a career in big data or Artificial Intelligence (AI). *"We need to demystify computer science, show it is a tool useful to everyone in everyday life, and introduce computer science as a regular subject as early as middle school. We live in a digital era now. These skills are essential."*[3]

In this context, the theme chosen by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for this year's International Day of the Girl Child **'Digital generation. Our generation.'** will call attention to the power and diversity of adolescent girls as digital change-makers and designers of learning. It also strives for solutions that address the challenges and opportunities girls face in their digital worlds.[4]

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital platforms for learning, earning, and connecting. Yet, currently around 2.2 billion people below the age of 25 still do not have internet access at home, with girls more likely to be cut off. [5]

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[1] https://www.unicef.org/stories/tech-trailblazers/france
[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid
[4] https://www.unicef.org/media/106196/file/International%20Day%20of%20the%20Girl%202021,%20Concept%20Note.pdf
[5] Ibid

Moreover, the gender gap for global internet users grew from 11% in 2013 to 17% in 2019,[6] while globally, the percentage of females among Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) graduates is below 15% in over two-thirds of countries.[7]

Digital access is vital for women and girls as it can help them expand their sense of self in the world, increase civic engagement, and raise awareness of their rights. *"Without increased digital adoption and use, girls will have fewer employment opportunities and will face additional barriers to workforce participation"* since in today's digital age, jobs require advanced digital skills to engage with a digital economy.[8] Additionally, harmful gendered stereotypes and norms may impact digital realities and potential benefits for women and girls as well for the sector itself.

In order to address this reality, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) works to safeguard gender equality by creating awareness-raising campaigns and providing training sessions to different groups of women and men on challenging and addressing gender stereotypes. As part of this process, in 2020, the NCPE organised a Conference on AI and gender equality that offered an opportunity to assess and reflect on the role, experience and work of relevant stakeholders in AI, to raise awareness on gender equality and AI, and to highlight the necessary measures to sustain an environment which is free from any form of discrimination.[9]

Moreover, the NCPE is empowered by Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta to investigate complaints of alleged discrimination on the grounds of sex/gender and family responsibilities in employment, education, and vocational training as well as by banks and financial institutions.

To close the gender digital divide, factors such as access, digital literacy, and online safety should be addressed. Girls need access to devices, networks, and data to use and create digital

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[6] https://www.unicef.org/gender-equality/international-day-girl-2021
[7] https://www.unicef.org/media/106196/file/International%20Day%20of%20the%20Girl%202021,%20Concept%20Note.pdf
[8] https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/8311/file/What%20we%20know%20about%20the%20gender%20digital%20divide%20for%20girls:%20A%20literature%20review.pdf
[9] https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/News_and_Events/Press_Releases/2020/NCPE_IWD_Conference_4th_March_2020_Press_Statement.pdf

content. They also need to be digitally literate to fully participate in and contribute to digital life, be safe online, and develop analytical and critical skills.[10]

The International Day of the Girl Child focuses attention on the need to address the challenges girls face and to promote girls' empowerment and the fulfilment of their human rights.[11] On this international day, let's increase our commitment by taking a strong generational gender lens to address the digital divide experienced by today's generation of girls.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or *equality@gov.mt* *or our Facebook page.*

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[10] [What we know about the gender digital divide for girls: A literature review.pdf (unicef.org)](unicef.org)
[11] https://www.un.org/en/observances/girl-child-day