

## Going Digital Summit - Issues Note

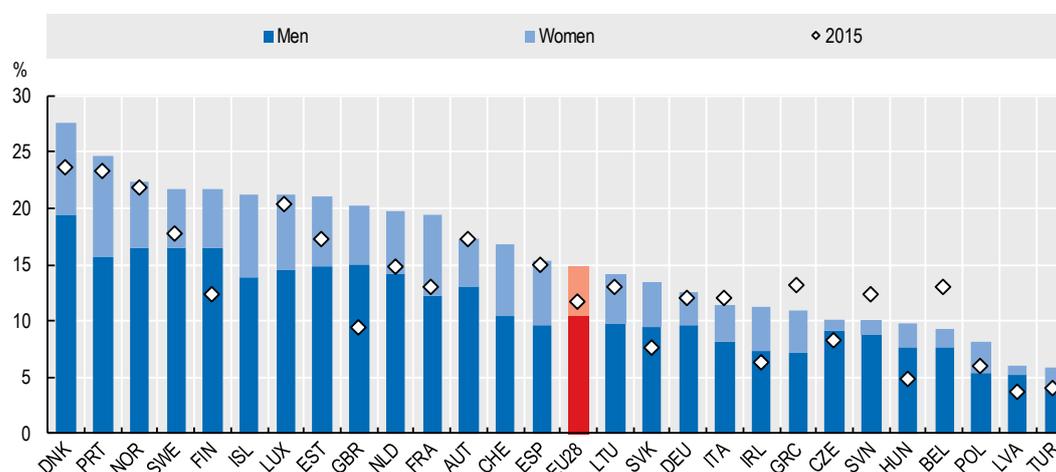
### Session 5B: Bridging the Digital Gender Divide

Despite the rapid overall uptake of digital technologies, divides still persist along different dimensions including gender. Across the OECD in 2016, 83% of women on average used the Internet, slightly less than men (85%), but with significant variation across countries. The gap in Internet usage was highest in Turkey (18 percentage points), which also exhibited the largest usage gap between young and elderly users of the Internet (over 66 percentage points). Across the world, over 250 million fewer women than men are online, although advances are being made in many countries to close this gap.

The gender gap is starker when considering more advanced applications. Across the European Union, more than twice as many young men (aged 16-24) than women have learnt to programme (Figure 1). Women's participation in inventive activities has been increasing, but the pace is slow. Greater inclusion of women in inventive activities is good not only for women themselves, but also for stronger economic growth and enhanced societal wellbeing. Inventions arising out of mixed teams, or women-only groups, appear to have wider technological breadth (and may therefore be more economically valuable) and higher impact than those in which only men are involved.

**Figure 1. Digital gender divides persist in the use of more advanced digital applications**

Share of 16-24 year-olds who can programme, by gender, as a percentage of all Internet users, 2017



Source: OECD (2019<sup>[3]</sup>), *Measuring the Digital Transformation*.

Hurdles to access, affordability, lack of education as well as inherent biases and socio-cultural norms curtail women and girls' ability to benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital transformation. For example, women spend 2.6 times more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work and this restricts the time they can spend in paid work or to upskill themselves.

Women are also less likely to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) or to pursue careers in the ICT sector. These divides seem to emerge early; by the

age of 15, only an average of 0.5% of girls across the OECD wish to become ICT professionals, compared to 5% of boys, while twice as many boys as girls hope to become engineers, scientists and architects. This gap persists later in life, with women representing about 30% of all tertiary graduates in the natural sciences, engineering or ICT fields in the OECD in 2015. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are fewer women in STEM professions and fewer female entrepreneurs – and those women that do start businesses in the ICT sector face socio-cultural gender bias when raising capital.

Policy, especially in the form of co-ordinated and complementary actions, may reverse these trends and trigger a more inclusive path, based on narrowing digital and gender gaps. Addressing the digital gender divide requires raising awareness and tackling gender stereotypes, while at the same time enabling enhanced, safer and more affordable access to digital tools and fostering strong co-operation across stakeholders to remove barriers to girls and women’s full participation in the digital world. Digital technologies may provide new opportunities for making progress, underscoring the importance of broadening access.

But “tech fixes” can do little to address the underlying structural problems driving the digital gender divide and gender biases. Narrowing the (digital) gender divide is not about “fixing women”, or perpetuating existing roles with the aid of technology. Rather, the focus needs to be on putting in place concrete policy actions fostering women’s and girls’ full participation and inclusion in the digital economy, while at the same time addressing ingrained stereotypes and social norms that lead to discrimination and even violence against women. Such actions could include:

- The design and implementation of national digital strategies that actively aim to close the gender digital access, adoption and usage gaps, and improve the affordability of digital technologies while enhancing online safety.
- Adapt national skills strategies to increase awareness of the digital gender divide, narrow skill gaps, address gender-biased approaches in education and training, and help address stereotypes related to fields of study and career prospects.
- Facilitate the labour market participation of women (both entry and re-entry after e.g. maternity leave), foster gender-neutral parental leave-taking and childcare services provision, and address career progression issues.
- Foster women’s entrepreneurship, leadership and engagement in innovation.
- Foster evidence-based gender-related actions and collect gender-disaggregated data on a persistent basis to verify progress.

**Q1:** How can policy makers help bridge the digital gender divide? What should be the priorities?

**Q2:** How can women be encouraged to study STEM subjects and pursue careers in the tech sectors, including ICT? What approaches work?

**Q3:** What can be done to strengthen the engagement of women in innovation and digital development, including software development?

**Q4:** How can the OECD help in addressing these challenges?