

**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Women's Day**

8 March 2023

On International Women's Day, we celebrate girls and women across the globe – and we remember that women's rights must never be taken for granted.

Indeed, the path towards a gender-equal world is an uncertain one: gradual progress, made over generations, can be wiped out in one fell swoop. The women and girls of Afghanistan know this well. In a few short months, they have lost their most fundamental rights – including the right to education.

The focus of this year's Day is innovation and technology for gender equality, a subject at the core of UNESCO's crosscutting actions in education, the sciences, culture and communication.

Technology affects almost every aspect of our lives – how we work, learn, communicate, and participate in the public sphere. However, women are four times less likely to have advanced ICT skills, and represent less than 20 % of the tech force. In the world of AI, women do only 12% of research.

This has serious knock-on effects. Because women and girls are less present in developing technology, gender stereotypes and bias are being perpetuated, and sometimes exacerbated, in the digital environment. Even worse, online gender-based violence and harassment silence women and deter them from participating in the public sphere – for example, in journalism, where nearly three-quarters of women have experienced online violence, and just under a third self-censor as a result, according to UNESCO research.

We need to bridge the gender technological divide – and this starts with education. While there are more girls in school today than ever before, women and girls are still under-represented as learners and teachers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

For this reason, UNESCO is working to put women's and girls' talents towards making technology development a lever for gender equality. In Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, for example, thousands of girls have benefited from our digital skills education and mentorship programmes.

Beyond education, UNESCO is committed to making the digital sphere a safer place for women. We are promoting diversity and inclusion in tech industries – for instance, through the Women 4 Ethical AI network, building on our Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, which supports the elimination of biases but also the financing of women-led tech. And we are working with our partners to develop and disseminate practical tools and legal guides, notably for women journalists and artists.

At the policy level, we are making gender equality a clear focus of the guidelines we are developing for the regulation of digital platforms – building on the solid foundations laid at the Internet for Trust conference convened by UNESCO in February 2023.

Today, on International Women's Day, we need to ensure that women and girls benefit from the opportunities offered by the technological transformation – but also, and above all, we need to ensure that they can help shape it, on an equal footing.