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GovTech and Gender Equity: Why it matters?

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When it comes to digital skills and careers, women lag behind men across the world. As governments implement GovTech solutions, care should be taken to remove gender biases.

The gender gap, seen in most spheres of human activity, extends to the digital world too. According to International Telecommunications Union's (ITU) 2022 data, only 57 percent of women globally use the internet, compared to 62 percent of men. This gender divide is also reflected in the digital skills and talent of the workforce. For example, in Europe and North America, most ICT professionals are male (only 16.9 percent are female), while in Africa and Asia Pacific, the situation is better—in fact, 31.3 percent of ICT professionals in Africa are women, and 30.4 percent in Asia Pacific.

Similar examples of the digital divide can also be found in the wider digital economy. According to one study, 93 percent of venture capital funds are controlled by white men, which could be problematic for tech start-ups led by women and minorities. Gender biases

also exist in the technology space: University of Chicago research has shown that Google's speech recognition was 70 percent more likely to accurately recognize male speech than female speech. In another instance from a couple of years ago, U.S. regulators investigated complaints that the algorithms that decided limits on a certain credit card were allocating higher limits to men than women.

The public sector is not immune to this digital gender-gap trend. For example, the World Bank Bureaucracy Lab says women represent 46 percent of the public sector workforce globally, compared with 33 percent in the private sector. On the surface, that looks like a positive indicator. However, women's participation is primarily confined to lower-paid jobs. On average, women experience a wage penalty compared to similarly educated and trained men in the labor market making 87 percent of the average man's salary in the public sector. Even in professions where women are the majority, like teachers and medical workers, they still experience a 21 percent and 16 percent average global gender wage penalty or wage gap which is the difference in wages between men and women with similar skills and background. The historically low representation of women in decision-making roles in government and public services, as well as in IT careers, leads to the risk of gender-biased government digitalization, which leaves behind or underrepresents women in the public service workforce, more than women in some gig economy sectors.

GovTech approaches that support public sectors to navigate digital transformation with a gender systems-thinking mindset are strategic policy tools to secure social cohesion and well-being. In a context where governments are urged to build back better with citizen-centric approaches, a gender mainstreaming policy lens will strengthen GovTech policies and strongly contribute to impactful, resilient, and sustainable public governance approaches. Two approaches can support a digital transition in the public sector with enhanced gender equity:

1. Firstly, it is critical to examine the broad digital talent panorama by gender in the public sector, including the expected gender gap in user digital skills, as well as in IT careers in general and in the public service specifically. Recent research shows that women are better represented among IT professions. They demonstrably earn a larger share of ICT-related degrees; for example, 58 percent of ICT degrees in the UAE, 48 percent in Thailand, and 56 percent in Panama. What can be done to further women's advancement in ICT skills and talent to build the next cadre of civil servants?
2. Public policy dialogue should examine the role of digital services and participation platforms in supporting women's well-being. Adopting user-centric and agile design and delivery approaches for public services (such as through women's participation in service co-creation) could be an enabler of gender equity.

As digital technologies become critical to enhance the governments' relations with its constituencies, women and girls should be placed at the center of GovTech policies. The promotion of gender balance needs to be assumed as a requisite by default in the design,

implementation and monitoring of public sector digitalization policies and as a fundamental goal of the broader ecosystem of public, private and civil society ecosystem of GovTech stakeholders.

Editor's note

This is the first of a series of blogs dedicated to discussing the importance of gender lens in GovTech policymaking and implementation. The two forthcoming blogs of this series will explore and discuss the areas of the analysis presented above: digital skills, digital careers, and gender imbalance; and mainstreaming gender in digital service design and delivery. These blogs are the result of a collaboration between the World Bank [GovTech Global Unit](#) with [The Digital Economist](#), in line with the multistakeholder thinking of the [GovTech Global Partnership](#).