LEARNING BRIEF

International Women's Day 2023: "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality"

This Learning Brief was compiled by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) following the webinar held to celebrate women and shed a spotlight on the global challenges that women face in relation to the participation of women and girls in digital technology to enhance access education. It also aims to highlight the key challenges and opportunities that digital education should address for pragmatic responses to achieve gender-transformative education and, more broadly, gender equality. According to the GCE scoping study harnessing EdTech, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced a transition to alternative means of education delivery. This meant that large groups of children were excluded from digital learning delivery. The gender component of the digital divide is that women and girls are much more unlikely to access the internet than boys and men leading to the global digital gap in access. This means that any policy or programme to get more people online will only succeed if interventions address this gap and offer mechanisms that enable equitable access for all marginalised groups.

MARCH 2023

About the webinar

On the 8th of March 2023, the GCE convened the International Women's Day (IWD 2023) learning and sharing webinar, under the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality" which informed the development of this Learning Brief. The theme is aligned with the priority theme for the upcoming 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW-67), "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." The IWD celebrates women and girls who are championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education to be inclusive for all. Speakers during the webinar were Ms. Faraja Syvia Gloria Nyalandu-GCE Board member representing the African constituency, Professor Malu Valenzuela-Network of Popular Education among Women-Mexico, Ms. Jeyda Bicer- Digital communication Specialist-United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and Ms. Rahma Sami-Arab Campaign for Education for All (ACEA) who explored the impact of the digital gender gap on widening economic and social inequalities, prescribed solutions, recommendations and intervention strategies to mitigate the digital divide between men and women. The event also spotlighted the importance of protecting the rights of women and girls in digital spaces and addressing online and ICT-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV). Panellists' recommendations identified interventions to mitigate further exacerbation of digital divides, such as a gender-responsive approach to innovation, technology, and digital education that can increase women and girls' awareness regarding their rights and civic engagement. Advancements in digital technology offer immense opportunities for education continuity, particularly post-COVID-19 pandemic address development and humanitarian challenges and achieve development goals' planning processes. Unfortunately, the opportunities of the digital revolution also present a risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality. Growing inequalities are becoming increasingly evident in the context of digital skills and access to technologies, with women being left behind as the result of this digital gender divide. Therefore, we call on inclusive and transformative technology and digital education are crucial for a sustainable future.

The purpose and objectives of the innovation and technology for gender equality webinar was to:
- Bring together, through celebration and public awareness of International Women's Day, civil society actors, public and private stakeholders, humanitarians, and gender equality advocates providing an opportunity to highlight the role of all stakeholders in improving access to digital tools to achieve gender-transformative education and ensure no girl is left behind.
- Highlight the key challenges and opportunities that digital education needs to address for programmatic responses to gender equality and inclusion to achieve transformative education.
- Identify key leverage points on a gender-responsive approach to innovation, technology, and digital education to increase the awareness of women and girls regarding their rights and civic engagement.

Context setting: Phumza Luthango - GCE Policy, Research, and Advocacy Coordinator

In the opening remarks, participants were welcomed to the event. This year's IWD event celebrates leading pioneers and advocates who continue to raise the batten of modernised groups of women and girls. Under this year's theme, it was empathised that there cannot be anything for us, without us (women and girls). For this years' IWD event, the GCE invited esteemed guests and experts in the digitisation of education to discuss the increasing digital divide between men and women in the digital space. The discussions brought together GCE members and partners to share their insights and recommendations as we take to task decision makers, power players and the private sector to secure the equality and inclusion of women and girls in the digital space. It was also lamented that a new kind of poverty confronts the world, one that excludes women and girls in devastating ways through digital poverty. It is without a shred of doubt that the digital divide has become the new face of gender inequality.

The impact of digitisation on the right to education

During the presentation, Ms. Faraja Syvia Gloria Nyalandu highlighted that:

- Technology and other digital platforms are resources that can be used for learning, but in essence, not an end, but a means to an end. On its own, technology will not stand on itself as a guarantee to the right to education. It is important to emphasise that girls and women face considerable barriers and discrimination in accessing digital education, particularly the ones in rural areas, the less privileged and those living in poverty.

Image 1: The impact of digitisation on the right to education, Faraja Syvia Gloria Nyalandu-GCE Board member representing the African
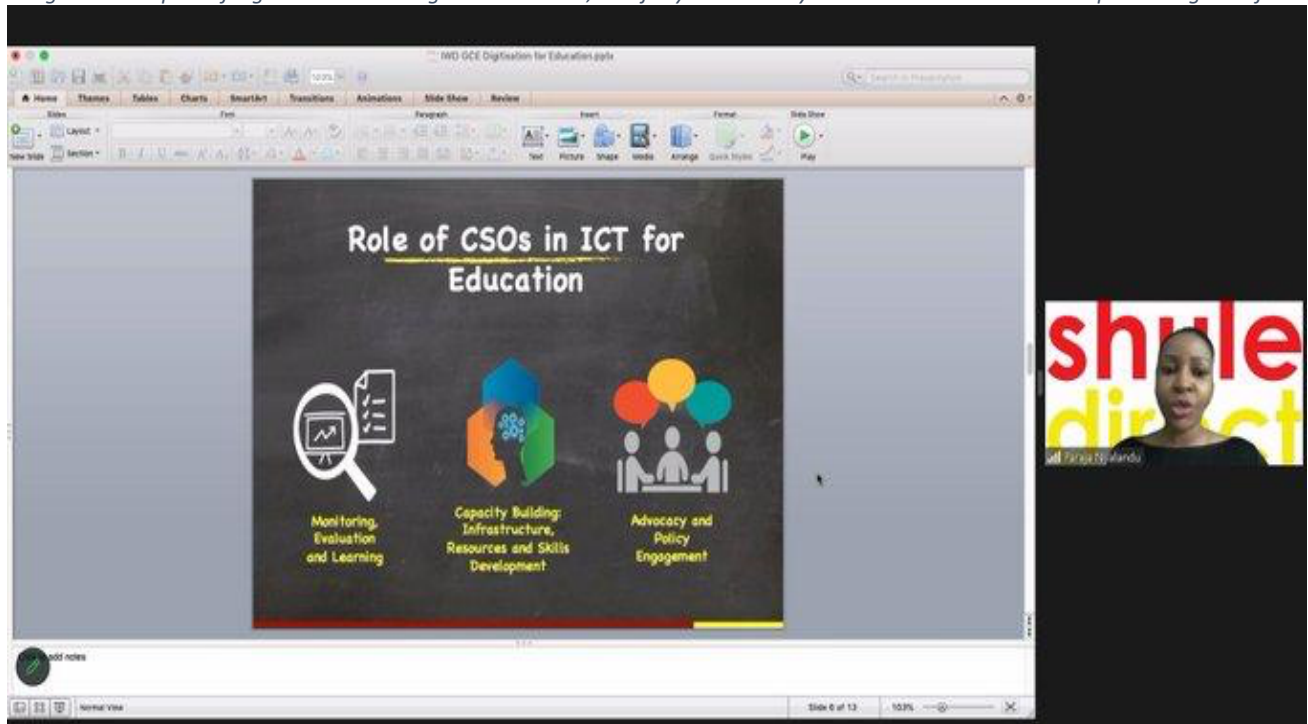
constituency.

- To put this assertion into context and take us a step back, it is important to note that in most African countries, most teachers still heavily rely on and use 'chalk and board' to teach pupils and engage them in practical school work. Schools in Africa still battle with access to and adequately skilled teachers with the right skill set to utilise EdTech in carrying out their duties, a shortage in effective learning resources for students, cost of ICT gadgets, connectivity, and unfavourable learning conditions from primary up to secondary school. Further, digital skills and capabilities among both learners and teachers-to use technology need to be assessed, including the availability of adequate ICT infrastructure and administrative capacities at institutions of learning.
- For Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Africa to achieve equitable and quality education, they should advocate and push for well-orchestrated training and deployment of qualified teachers in EdTech in schools. In essence, this technology can be critical in making the work of teachers much easier by supplementing learning in instances where students have learning difficulties/impairments. EdTech can be crucial in supporting children with special needs and disabilities to enable them to enjoy their right to education as per their ability and needs.
- In addition to what has been proposed above, technology allows learners to engage with others at a broader scale. For example, virtual engagements make it possible for students worldwide to meet for cross-pollination of knowledge and exchange ideas in dealing with the problems they face at various levels of education. However, critical questions such as accessibility to ICT gadgets and their ability to use them need to be answered. We need to consider the availability of EdTech at home and schools, bearing in mind the cost of digital infrastructure, devices and connectivity as this really matters in promoting the right to education in African countries.
- Finally, to complement EdTech, it is important for CSOs to think about stepping up the use of readily available and taking advantage of cheaper information dissemination platforms such as SMSs and radio through which learners can obtain new knowledge because these platforms have a larger coverage in Africa.

The importance of facilitating empowerment and justice through an intersectional approach to enhance access to digital education.

Under this section, it was noted that:
- Given the speed that the technological revolution has reached and the impact it has had on all areas of human endeavour, technology has become an important developmental aspect for most states, as well as for the international and national organisations to provide women and girls with the opportunities for the use of ICTs, artificial intelligence and digital education. Over the recent years, it is evident that such demands are a priority for national and global agendas.
- In the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, it is being proposed to move towards a new productive and technological paradigm. There is a need to include a gender perspective in technological development, eliminate sexist stereotypes in the planning and implementation of digital strategies, promote policies professional and educational programs for girls and women to participate in innovation/technological areas, and finally promote laws that encourage the participation of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as in the field of artificial intelligence. Despite insisting, for more than 30 years, to increase the use of ICT, artificial intelligence, and digital education in LAC and other parts of the world, not much progress has been made.

- While a third of women connect to the Internet, half of the men do so.
- Due to these disparities, in 2022, the world economy lost US$1 trillion in GDP due to excluding women and girls from the digital world.
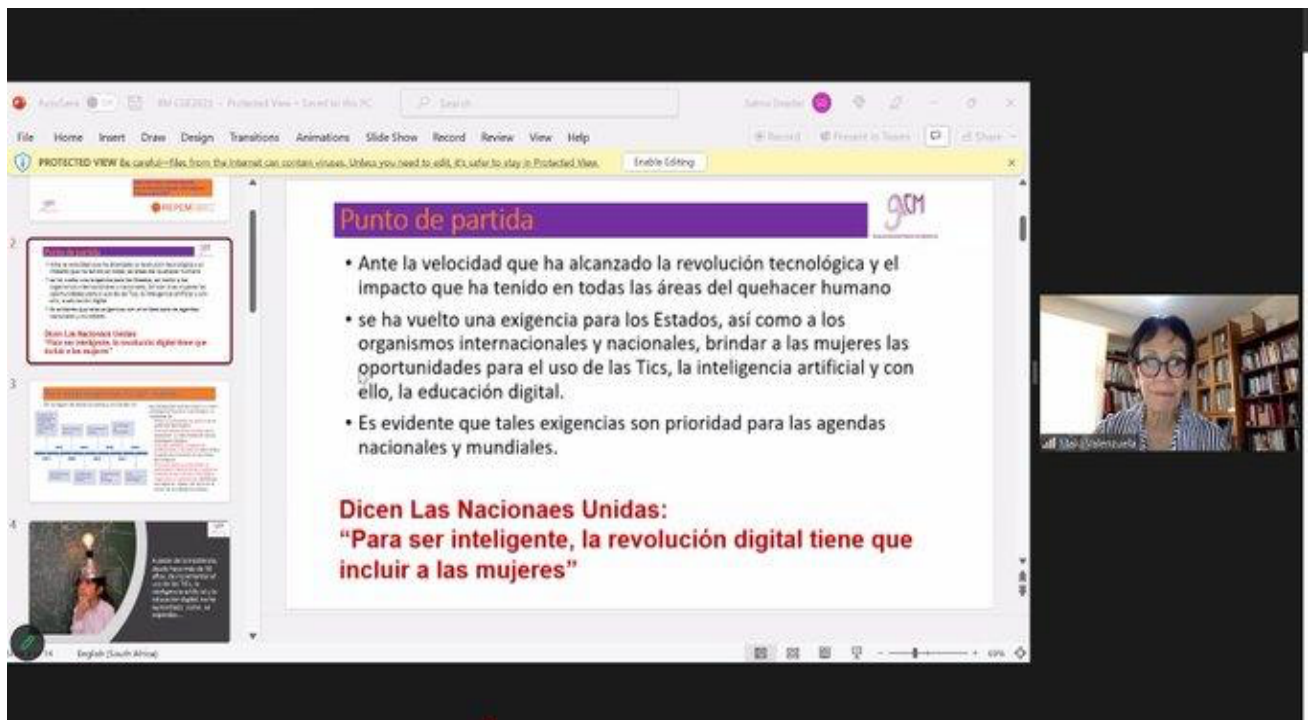

Image 2: The importance of facilitating empowerment and justice through an intersectional approach to enhance access to digital education, Professor Malu Valenzuela, Network of Popular Education among Women-Mexico.

- If governments across the globe adopt policies to close the digital divide of gender, the world would generate an estimated increase of US$524 billion through economic activity by 2025.
- The digital gender gap reflects structural inequalities caused by neo-liberal systems and patriarchy.
- However, there is growing interest, in certain sectors, to prioritise education and digital training in schools with the purpose of increasing the productivity and competitiveness of companies, and thus promoting critical thinking, awareness, and the values that allow democracy, justice, and dignity as principles essential for social transformation.
- Intersectionality is an analytical tool to know, understand and respond to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege, and how it influences ethical and political aspects in the struggles of women in the full enjoyment of their human rights. Intersectionality allows women to organise themselves and participate in networks to address issues that affect them in a specific way. We should also put into consideration ethnic, cultural and ethical issues as EdTech can be used to take away women and girls' rights and expose them to cyber related-abuses on the internet. We should also guide against the dominance of men in the use of education technology as they can end up isolating women and girls and prevent them from enjoying their right to education.
- To promote digital education through an intersectional approach, we should first establish who wants to, can, and should participate, for what purposes, their needs, contexts and stories/experiences, and

barriers based on their ethnic or racial origin, sexual/gender identity, migrant status and level of schooling.

● To address these problems, advocating for digital education should not be done in a generic manner, but rather this should be done by being specific, identifying how and where women and girls want to use it. Digital technology should not try to substitute traditional ways of learning, but rather they should complement and reinforce each other.

The technology sector has outstanding debts on gender equality.

Image 3: The technology sector has outstanding debts on gender equality, Jeyda Bicer, Digital communication Specialist- United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI).

● In the introduction, it was noted that UNGEI uses its various platforms to amplify the stories and experiences of young feminists around the importance of protecting the rights of women and girls in ICT spaces. This year's theme is critical to the world's present realities and the current challenges we are facing. Innovation and technology are powerful tools to progress.

● Gender equality, in and through education, strengthens feminist movements, ignites changes and supports global solidarity and interconnectedness. At the same time, we are obliged to recognise and address the gender division, divide and GBV that are entrenched in the digital world.

● Through digital media, can be able to stay connected with their partners and communities to bring issues into the spotlight, such as school-related GBV, menstrual hygiene management, comprehensive sexuality education, intergenerational partnerships, young feminist leadership, breaking down gender stereotypes and gender transformative education, to name a few.

● Digital media can be crucial in engaging communities and also promote awareness through messaging graphics, infographics and video animation. In 2021, the UNGEI supported the world's largest digital youth which brought together 1000 activists who demanded that G7 leaders shift power and resources

for girls' education and leadership. Digital space can be used to provide a brave and honest platform for young people to connect and learn from each other.

- During the pandemic, UNGEI partnered with Gender at Work to and piloted the first edition of the Feminist School with 26 young feminists from across the world, all selected from both rural and urban areas. The training was done on the Zoom platform which included key elements on feminist principles, self-collective care, understanding conflict and power, dynamics that can be readily adapted to a variety of stakeholder working to advance gender equality in and through education. Now, UNGEI is looking to grow the feminist school into an innovative and digital hub that promotes gender equality and feminist leadership. These are some examples of the organisation's work and importance of young people's access to digital spaces to be active in, feel safe and heard right. However, all this work is done with the understanding that challenges such as COVID-19 further exacerbated gender inequality, the digital divide and GBV. Fortunately, activism and work continued to engage with communities by leveraging on technology, wherever possible. Some organisations partnered with radio stations to deliver classes on health information, and deliver ICT courses online to empower girls to step into the ever-growing digital space.
- The WhatsApp platform can be useful in disseminating information about mental health, virus prevention and barriers to education to reach children, especially among girls and queer children who are out of school for one reason or the other.
- Access to mobile phones and the internet has proven to be a powerful tool among the youth for them to be able to connect, learn and raise awareness about issues that affect and prevent them from enjoying their right to education. However, we should be aware of the high rates of violence that young girls, women, and LGBTQ children face online, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, girls and women restrict their engagement online for fear of cyber aggression, sexualised cyberbullying, gossip, and hateful comments. The COVID-19 era was also a time when girls who did not have access to technology were further left behind and unable to continue their education.
- Often, online GBV is accentuated by the lack of formalised policies and regulations to prevent digital harms and protect users in 74 percent of countries included in the web foundations, Web index law enforcement agencies, and the courts. This means perpetrators are not held accountable due to a lack of clear regulations and limited ability to prosecute offenders. This results in a lack of confidence in the legal system and law enforcement to protect 'at risk' users, who are disproportionately girls.

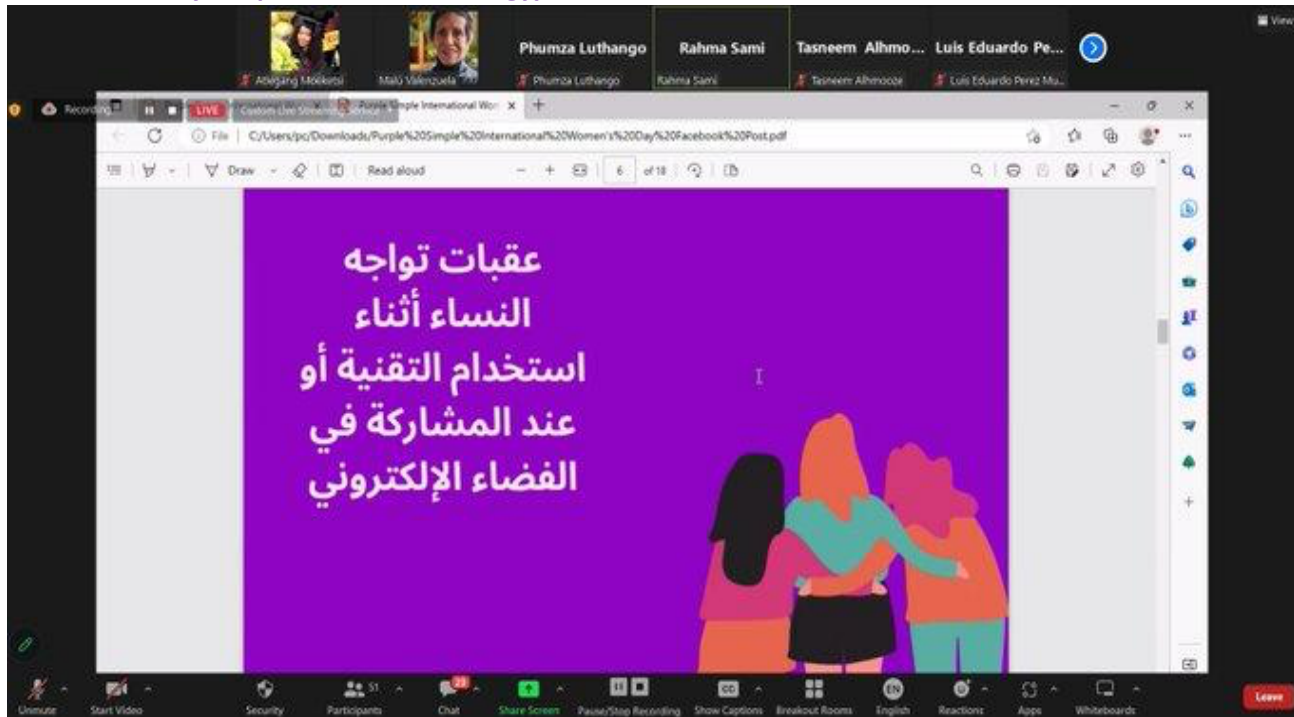**Call for a safe cyberspace for women in Egypt.**

Image 4: Call for a safe cyberspace for women in Egypt, Ms. Rahma Sami-Arab Campaign for Education for All (ACEA).

From the presentation on cyberspace for women in Egypt, it was highlighted that:

- In recent years, GBV has increased in cyberspace for women who will be doing various things on the internet.
- Women and girls encounter protracted violence online, on a day-to-day basis (hate speech, cyberbullying) in addition to physical assault and abuse.
- Women aged 18-34 are the most vulnerable and face the biggest assault online to the extent that some commit suicide, particularly in the Arab world cyberspace. Female journalists and celebrities/public figures are not spared on various platforms. 70 million comments were once targeted toward 10 female journalists in 2016.
- Recently, a young woman who shared her political views online was targeted and attacked, and her personal data was shared online to strike fear in the hearts of other activists/political commentators.
- 41 percent of women in Egypt are visible in the digital space, but 351 million women are not able to access the internet and are scared to use it due to fear of retribution and targeted attacks. Women shy away from participating in online discussions due to fear of victimisation, especially by men and boys.

Q and A session

Q: (Directed to Professor Professor Malu Valenzuela): I share that intersectionality is a political instrument for the struggle of women for their rights. I wonder how you see the role of men in this political process? If I understand the concept of intersectionality correctly, it is precisely about overcoming the 'duality' between men and women to promote gender equality.

A: We have been emphasising on the point of engaging men, but we are highlighting how our society is patriarchal and use online tools to eliminate the rights of women from other spaces. The struggle is not between men and women, but the problem has always been structural and systematic and that's why we need to create spaces to fight, through the intersectionality approach, to reach marginalised communities so that their voices can be heard. This is how both men and women can join forces to combat the obstacles that have prevented women from enjoying their rights.

Lessons and recommendations from the discussions

- CSOs and other stakeholders should step-up their advocacy efforts to increase access to the internet and digital education. More funding is required to improve the ICT infrastructure and access to technological gadgets by women and girls. Opportunities for women in the IT spaces in Egypt should be made available to achieve gender equality as this space is dominated by men.
- To mitigate online GBV, governments should adopt and enforce formalised policies and regulations to prevent digital harms and protect users in 74 percent of countries included in the web foundations, Web index law enforcement agencies and the courts. Policymakers should therefore ensure that legal frameworks for online safeguarding, security, and data privacy use a gender lens and offer protection for women and girls.
- In addition, a gender-transformative approach to education is required for men and boys so that they desist from harmful online practices and GBV.
- It is also important to increase the opportunity for women and girls to develop digital skills and build their confidence to pursue careers as ICT professionals to ensure that not only the products and services meet their needs and digital realities but build girls' skills and confidence in doing so.
- Content-specific research is a prerequisite to understanding girls' digital experiences, the security and safety risks that they face online, and any issues/ fears in their community about girls' use of technology. This can help communities understand how they can support girls to stay safe online rather than viewing the internet as a dangerous place.
- It is important for organisations to use digital media to stay connected with its partners and communities to bring issues into the spotlight, such as school related GBV, cyber violence, mitigation strategies, recommendations, and lessons learned so that other partners can also utilise these same mechanisms to mitigate online GBV and promote digital education. Digital media is a powerful tool if used strategically to promote awareness through messaging graphics, infographics, and video animation. UNGEI is open to collaborations and partnerships where it can lend its platform (s) to young feminists and activists, as it has a wide and extensive audience across the world.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic era, UNGEI and most organisations used digital platforms to connect with its community. However, to motivate participation and continuous engagement, it is important for organisations to provide stipends for internet connectivity considering the high cost of data, particularly for participants from low-middle-income countries. Even though things have started moving back to normal, organisations should still make digital spaces available to their community and keep on exploring new innovations that can enable people to attend meetings from anywhere in the world.

- Organisations such as UNGEI, UN agencies, government departments, the public and private sectors, and NGOs, among others, should support the work of young people as technology continues to develop/evolve, creating sustainable solutions that close the gender digital divide enabling women and girls to access more digital/online opportunities be it in education, employment or social engagement.

Resources

The webinar recording can be accessed: here.

GCE's press statement on the occasion of the International Women's Day is available: here.

AASU's Girls in STEM Project commemoration event video on the digital empowerment of women is available: here.

Participants were invited by the Spanish Coalition to view and share a video on cyber action: give rhythm to equality aimed at educational spaces in order to reflect on gender inequalities and how transformative education can help to eradicate them. The action invites boys and girls to reflect and together create a song in the form of a rap. For this, the Coalition collaborated with a music school and an artist and developed a song that can be accessed: here.