Education in the digital age for women and girls: recommendations from the Transforming Education Summit

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Summary of text:
Over the past 20 years, great advancements have been made in girls' and women's education. In middle- and high-income countries, girls outperform boys in reading at primary school, and in science at secondary school. Nevertheless, identity, background and ability continue to dictate educational opportunities. Regional inequalities are significant; in some countries the extreme exclusion of women and girls from educational contexts persists, while significant pockets of exclusion remain in others. The most marginalized learners face several layers of discrimination. In at least 20 countries, largely in sub-Saharan Africa, very few young girls in poor rural areas complete secondary school, while only 11 percent of the poorest girls in crisis-affected countries do so. The global shift to online learning and other forms of educational technology as a response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic has likely widened educational inequalities further. Multi-country research has suggested that boys are significantly more likely than girls to possess the hardware and digital skills needed to access learning opportunities through connected technologies.

With better planning and sensitization, the education sector's embrace of ed-tech during the pandemic could have helped 'un-gender' technology as 'male'. The uncompromising, rather than voluntary, move to online learning presented an opportune moment to help women and girls understand that they have the same right to use technology as boys. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that problematic gender stereotypes surrounding technology appear to have intensified. In the rushed attempt to keep learning opportunities intact following abrupt school closures, women and girls did not seem to receive special attention. While girls and women likely gained new levels of access to technology and improved their digital skills as a result of the shift to ed-tech, it is unlikely that this progress was sufficient to close gender gaps in skills and confidence. Gender-responsive, rather than gender-blind or gender-neutral, approaches to digital learning are required to reconcile the deficits in technology access, skills, confidence and comfort for girls and women.

Key recommendations:
- Quality education must be provided as a public good and a human right. Universal access to broadband connectivity must be in place for teachers, students, schools, and other educational environments, and special efforts are needed to target women and girls with campaigns to expand access to and use of connected technology. Universal digital literacy for educational purposes must also be ensured, alongside digital content which is freely available, easy to access and use, and, where feasible, aligned with the formal curriculum. Formal education and other spaces of socialization and learning, such as community centres, libraries and museums, should be used as vehicles to 'de-gender' technology as 'male'.
- Gender equality should be at the heart of education sector plans, budgets, and policies. Gender disparities and their underlying factors must be identified at each stage of children's education, and budgets, strategies and commitments that eliminate harmful gender norms in pedagogy must be scaled up. Research on education technology must be financed and its impact, cost-effectiveness and equity implications assessed before it is applied to policies and programs.
- Platforms and tools must be designed to support rather than replace teachers. The capacity of teachers, counsellors and entire school communities should be scaled up to enable them to provide transformative education and career orientation, which deconstructs stereotypes and redresses gender gaps in digital literacy and STEM participation.