NAVIGATING MEGATRENDS:
The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future

A Safe Digital Future

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In mid-2024, UNFPA issued five think pieces to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the landmark 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Under the framing of *Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future*, the five think pieces are titled:

▶ Demographic Change and Sustainability

▶ The Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

▶ The Future of Population Data

▶ ICPD and Climate Action

▶ **A Safe Digital Future**

This brief highlights key findings and recommended actions on how digitalization can support the future-proofing of the ICPD

The think pieces explore ways to sustain, refresh and accelerate ICPD commitments in a world of radical transformation. Designed for policymakers, they reflect on progress and highlight likely future scenarios. They offer starting points for discussion on what's next for population, development and sexual and reproductive health and rights including ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.

This short summary highlights key findings and recommended actions on how to future-proof the ICPD Programme of Action (PoA) in the face of rapidly emerging digital technologies that serve to both advance and hinder progress. While technology has been a feature in human innovation for decades, a digitalized world has rapidly transformed the way in which technologies are designed and deployed for the benefit of individuals and society.

It is undisputed that digitalization has enabled rapid economic growth and development in the last 30 years. Underpinned by profit-driven business models, however, the design and deployment of digital technologies may amplify existing inequalities with unique risks for women and girls in all their diversity. In a world increasingly characterized by digitalization and the rapid proliferation of technological innovation, the urgency to protect and continue to advance progress against the PoA cannot be understated. Safeguarding measures, innovating alternate business models, and effective and cross-jurisdictional regulation to protect, promote and respect human rights, including the principles of the ICPD, throughout the design and deployment of technologies, must be actioned to future-proof the PoA.

Introduction

The world has radically changed since the 1994 ICPD adopted its PoA. When 179 governments committed to placing the rights and dignity of people at the heart of sustainable development, only 0.4 per cent of people globally used the Internet. Today, nearly 70 per cent are connected in some way, with previously unimaginable access to knowledge and resources. Technologies

have transformed countless lives across the world. They have increased access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including through enhanced diagnostic and medical services; enabled rapid response mechanisms to support survivors of gender-based violence; assisted in forecasting changing demographics; and ensured that information and services are reaching the most vulnerable populations, including young and older people, as well as people with disabilities. However, access remains uneven with digital divides stretching across nations and between population groups entrenching existing inequalities. Further, digital technologies that are not designed to support safe, secure, and private access and use may inadvertently or deliberately provide spaces for the perpetration of harm to both individuals as well as society more broadly.

To harness the potential for digital technologies to future-proof the universal principles and commitments of the ICPD, global commitment and action are required with ever-increasing urgency to keep pace with the rapidly emerging proliferation of technologies across the world.

Key insights

Digital technologies have accelerated globalization, transformed labour and education markets, and propelled shifts in lifestyles, health management, social interactions and civic engagement.[1] They have expanded opportunities for people in all their diversity to express themselves in online spaces, share and gather knowledge, access education and economic opportunities, engage in democratic discussion, build community, power movements and resistance, exercise their rights, and share their voices and interests.[2] Digital access to information, services and commodities increases capacities and skills, and can foster empowerment and agency. Safe and ethical technology, deployed equitably, can promote and protect the dignity and rights of all people – principles that are at the heart of sustainable development and the PoA.

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Harnessing the power of digital technology for all requires understanding the impacts of its design, deployment, and underlying business model. Accelerated investments in innovative digital technologies all around the world have the potential to drive change at an unprecedented pace, including in the underlying norms and assumptions that underpin technology tools. To reverse the essentially biased technological infrastructure upon which the world is being built today, it is urgent to ensure that, in moving forward, digital technologies reflect the diversity of people around the globe and that no one is left behind.

Technology serves first those who have designed it and as such reflects the biases and assumptions of its developers who comprise dominant population groups. Similarly, deployment of technology serves those for whom it was designed and where the greatest profit can be generated. This creates bias in the design and deployment of the technology given that it serves a homogeneous group of predominately men, based in high-income countries.

Technology that exclusively serves the digital priorities of dominant groups reproduces and amplifies biases and inequalities. As the digitalization of public infrastructure makes services available at scale,

> **Digital technologies are facilitating new forms of GBV, and new tools and modalities to inflict GBV at scale**

inherent prejudices may deepen inequality by excluding those who are most marginalized, for reasons ranging from illiteracy to a lack of access to devices and connectivity. They may be deprived of essential social and other services, identification cards, and health services and information. A reliance upon infrastructure that is representative of dominant populations groups who design and access technologies is deepening inequalities as the technology reproduces stereotypes and inequities inherent in society. The replication of existing inequalities, for example, is already evident in artificial intelligence (AI) and the large language models deployed through it.

Furthermore, digital technologies are facilitating new forms of gender-based violence (GBV), and new tools and modalities to inflict GBV at scale. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF GBV), a term UNFPA coined in 2021 *(Making All Spaces Safe: Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence)* is "an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of [technologies including digital technologies], against a person on the basis of their gender." While the forms of TF GBV range from coercive control over women through digital surveillance and tracking devices to the generation of so-called "deep fake" images, online sexual abuse and coordinated online harassment and disinformation, the impact cannot be over stated. Several studies have highlighted the grave and disproportionate experience of TF GBV by women politicians, journalists and human rights defenders as well as women at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. While impacting individual women, the perpetration of TF GBV can also and is leading to the self-censorship and withdrawal of women from public life, affecting democratic processes and gender equality writ large.

To future-proof and accelerate the realization of the PoA using digital technologies requires integrating equity considerations in design and deployment supported by systems of accountability in industry business models. Technology, whether used for malicious or well-intentioned purposes, is often created and deployed without consideration of how it could deepen inequalities and cause individual and systemic harms. Safety, security and privacy by design are pillars of processes to ensure that digital technologies operate in line with human rights. Effective regulation and systems of accountability are critical to protect the human rights of users and provide redress when these rights are denied or violated.

In the deployment of technology, highly uneven access and uptake currently contribute to deepening socioeconomic, gender, geographic and age-based inequalities. While more women in low- and middle-income countries are using the Internet, their rate of adoption has slowed, and women remain 19 per cent less likely than men to use the Internet. Of the 900 million women who are still not connected, almost two thirds live in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where gender gaps are widest. Similarly, although data are scant, older people's use and uptake of technology are

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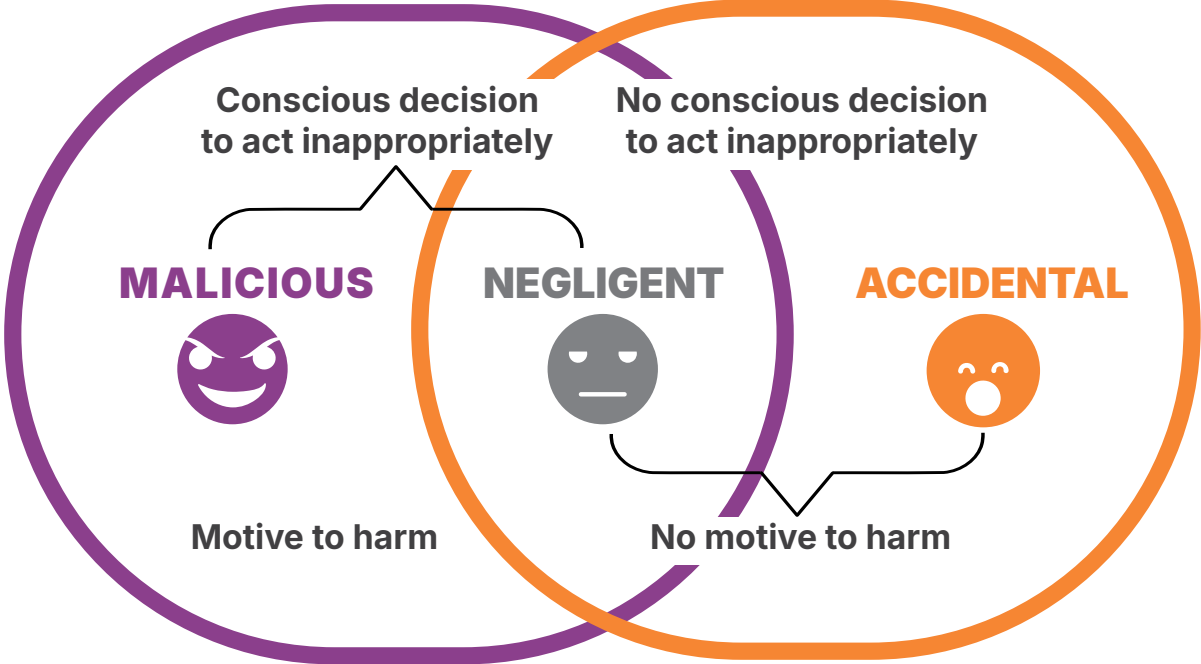
lower than for younger cohorts. This gap is exacerbated for older adults with disabilities, gender or sexually diverse older adults, and older adults in the Global South. While digitization of society and widespread deployment of digital technologies provide the potential to enhance healthy ageing, they can also negatively impact older people's ability to manage their affairs, place them at risk of exploitation, and undermine their autonomy, dignity and self-determination.

Issues around affordability, availability, safety, digital literacy and harmful social and gendered norms dictate uneven access. Until these barriers are systematically dismantled, digitalization of societies and the widespread deployment of technology will remain drivers of deepening inequalities.

Future-proofing the PoA will depend on regulating business models that privilege private technology companies over individuals and communities, particularly those that are most marginalized. The volume of data generated through digital technologies has exploded, yet such data are mostly stored, managed and traded by companies, governments and other actors for their own purposes. Often, individuals have not provided consent for the extraction and use of their personal data and are unaware of how those data are used, sold or stored. Indeed, personal data can be traded at very little cost and with very little transparency. They may be used by malicious actors, such as extremist groups conducting disinformation campaigns to undermine the rights of particular groups of people. Harms experienced by digital technology users will be the same, regardless of intention

▶ FIGURE 1

Digital technology designed without with safety, security and privacy

Source: Adapted from UNFPA, 2023. *Guidance on the Safe and Ethical Use of Technology to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices: Implementation Summary*. New York.

> **Commodifying personal data has become extractive and exploitative, taking place largely without user consent.**

or motivation, if the digital technology is not designed with safety, security and privacy at its heart (see Figure 1). Maintaining control over personal and intimate information is paramount to prevent exploitation, harm and deepening inequality.

One of the most lucrative Internet business models is the collection and sale of personal data for advertising. This has given rise to an opaque and complex industry where commodifying personal data has become extractive and exploitative, taking place largely without user consent. The potential for harm is great without effective regulations and alternatives. Social media platforms, for example, drive user engagement for advertising and product improvement in a manner that can spread harmful, shocking and often misogynistic content. This has become an even greater concern with the advent of AI, as it can exponentially exacerbate harmful norms.[3]

A recent analysis showed how women's reproductive milestones are used for microtargeting advertisements, fuelling the "lucrative digital ad businesses...while enforcing false stereotypes associated with childbearing". Not only are such stereotypes detrimental to women's rights and well-being, but the online advertising ecosystem denies women full sovereignty over their health data and leaves them in a perpetual state of vulnerability.[4]

Recommended actions

The urgency of action cannot be understated. Gender equality and progress against the PoA are silently and increasingly under threat. To ensure that the world can benefit from digital transformation and technological innovation, governments, technology companies, academia, civil society, GBV survivors and women's health advocates must work in unison to strengthen: understanding of the business models of technology, their design and systems of deployment in order to understand and bolster digital inclusion, including through the equitable and ethical design and deployment of technology; regulations and programmes to protect rights and safety; and efforts to address harmful tech industry business models. Specific recommendations include:

Digital inclusion: As the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Technology notes: "underserved groups need equal access to digital opportunities." It is important for all users to be able to access safe and ethical technology and to be equipped to navigate it safely. Investments are needed to enable equitable and meaningful connectivity, including by closing the gender digital divide; improving digital literacy; and promoting social and gender norms change.

Safety-by-design: Safety, security and privacy should be embedded from the inception of technology through: stronger industry standard-setting bodies to ensure compliance with safety-by-design; ensuring technology is developed and co-designed with diverse stakeholders; improving personal data consent mechanisms; supporting and retaining women across the tech sector; and investing in independent regulatory bodies.

Business models of technology: Commercial enterprises have a responsibility to adopt policies and practices that safeguard user data and privacy, with the aim to boost digital inclusion and protect and promote user safety. Governments can support these actions through collaborative models of partnership across academia, the private sector and government, promoting alternative technologies and processes of design and deployment; increasing the transparency of data economies and reporting requirements for tech companies; and ensuring that governance reforms in the tech industry are rights-based.

Regulation: Human rights-based laws and policy can help to ensure that technologies are safely and inclusively accessed and used, without risk of discrimination or harm, and with users' rights protected. A wide range of regulations are called for, including to enforce safety, security and the privacy of populations; the protection of user rights to personal data; better accountability in digital advertising; proactive prevention, mitigation and responses to harm; independent national regulators; and incentives and penalties for private sector compliance.

Prevention: Response efforts are important but achieving large-scale and systemic change requires addressing underlying causes of marginalization, discrimination and violence. This calls for: investing in the transformation of harmful social and gender norms; promoting and retaining women in science, technology, engineering and math to diversify the tech industry; investing in pre-emptive tools to prevent disinformation campaigns; building partnerships and networks of diverse stakeholders; strengthening research; and investing in digital literacy and education for policymakers as well as marginalized populations and young people.

Conclusion

In highlighting key findings and recommended actions for a safe digital future, this brief has shown that investment in safe and secure technology built on principles of data privacy and users' consent, along with rights-based regulations, are crucial for the meaningful digital inclusion of women and marginalized populations. Only with greater user protections can digital technology accelerate the achievement of the ICPD PoA.

Only with greater user protections can digital technology accelerate the ICPD PoA

ENDNOTES

1   United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2018. *Technology and Innovation Report 2018: Harnessing Frontier Technologies for Sustainable Development.*

2   Suzie Dunn, Tracy Vaillancourt and Heather Brittain, 2023. *Supporting Safer Digital Spaces*. Waterloo, Canada: Centre for International Governance Innovation. Samia Melhem, Claudia Morrell and Nidhi Tandon, 2009. *Information and Communication Technologies for Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

3   Laura Bates, 2020. *Men Who Hate Women: The Extremism Nobody Is Talking About*. London: Simon & Schuster.

4   Lucy Purdon, 2023. "Unfinished Business: Incorporating a Gender Perspective into Digital Advertising Reform in the UK and EU." Mozilla Foundation.

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