

Embracing DigitALL Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality to support achieving the SDGs: the case of Zambia

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The theme for the 2023 International Women's Day (8 March) was "DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality." It has generally been observed that women and girls still remain [underrepresented in areas of creation, use and regulation of technology](#). Additionally, they are more prone to abuse when using digital platforms and are less likely to utilise them.

While digitalisation brings about transformation and promising opportunities, it remains crucial to address ongoing disparities in digital access, including affordable connectivity, trade and logistics, digital payment solutions, and legal and regulatory frameworks. On top of this, governments are faced with the challenge to coordinate collaboration with different players such as civil society, the private sector, and the technical community to ensure the benefits of digital technologies are equally distributed. A further challenge is to ensure that all citizens benefit equitably.

For issues in trade, it is essential to cultivate a culture of digital entrepreneurship to ensure that everyone benefits from digitalisation. Implementing e-commerce strategies can play a pivotal role in establishing a common vision among stakeholders and encouraging a comprehensive governmental approach to developing an e-commerce-friendly environment. A report by [UN Women](#) states that,

[B]ringing women and other marginalised groups into technology results in more creative solutions and has greater potential for innovations that meet women's needs and promote gender equality. By contrast, excluding women from the digital world has shaved \$1 trillion from the gross domestic product of low- and middle-income countries in the last decade. Without action, this loss will grow to \$1.5 trillion by 2025.

These findings are a stark reminder of the action that needs to be taken by low and middle-income countries, especially by least developed countries (LDCs).

This should also be seen in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment. [The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development](#) (UNCTAD) points towards the link between technology and women's rights, with a target for utilising technology, and specifically information and communications technologies (ICTs), to unlock the potential of women and girls. Additionally, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth reminds us of the obligation to achieve full and productive employment for all women and men, and equal pay for work of equal value.

Policymakers are now confronted with the responsibility of not only keeping pace with the rapid technology change in trade but also ensuring that [formulation and implementation of relevant policies on digital trade](#) produces inclusive outcomes. This begs the question, what can be done to ensure that the potential is harnessed and actualised?

For starters, governments must invest in infrastructure and develop related policies to bridge the gender-based digital divide as it is a significant factor that contributes to the limited participation of women in digital trade – and is especially pronounced in Africa. [Rather than implementing one-size-fits-all interventions](#), understanding the local context within which these technologies are to be utilised is cardinal to developing home-grown solutions to the problem. Infrastructure development, access to the necessary equipment or devices, and capacity-building work hand-in-hand: rural areas are ripe for implementation of such interventions.

Further proposed actions include establishing networks for women entrepreneurs in e-commerce, learning from women role models in digital trade and disseminating good practices on [how to grow a business, access export markets, and develop sex-disaggregated statistics](#). These proposals are reasonable enough – but finance and implementation capacity are real constraints in many African countries. A key question, therefore, is how long will it take to see change?

While it is difficult to determine the period of effective implementation, some domestic governance issues such as implementation of frameworks and infrastructure to encourage uptake of communication services have started to show improvements. Most likely we will see incremental change. For instance, a survey conducted by the Zambia Information Communication Authority (ZICTA)

in 2022 to measure the progress in the uptake of ICT products revealed that participation in e-commerce among internet users was estimated at 13.3% for urban and 6.8% for rural areas. The findings also revealed that 64.4% of males and 35.6% of females utilised the services on the [Government Service Bus \(GSB\)](#), also known as the ZamPortal, which offers around 279 online services ranging from business payments to applications for import and export permits. The e-services on the ZamPortal are all part of the infrastructure supported by the [Smart Zambia Institute](#), a “Division in the Office of the President charged with the responsibility of the management and promotion of electronic Government services and processes; facilitate access to electronic Government services to improve service delivery to enhance citizens access to Government services”.

Initiatives like the GSB forefront convenience, increased access to, and reduced cost of doing business, as compared with the manual systems of accessing the services provided on the portal. It levels the playing field in that these services can now be accessed by anyone. However, there are still some requirements that have to be satisfied to make digital technology for gender equality a reality.

[Studies have proposed that incubator projects](#) are another intervention that could be utilised to demonstrate the viability of the internet and e-commerce. For instance, the International Trade Centre (ITC) [ecomConnect](#) platform was created with the aim of fostering collaboration among entrepreneurs, organisations, and industry experts. The platform facilitates the exchange of e-commerce solutions and provides free educational resources for all users. In Zambia, homegrown innovation and technology hubs include [BongoHive](#), [Jacaranda Hub](#), [Anakazi](#), and [National Technology Business Centre \(NTBC\)](#). Their work in this important agenda does not go without recognition as a number of international organisations and other partners have come on board to partner with them financially or otherwise. Hence, it remains true that technology hubs are key in improving the technical capacity of entrepreneurs in their quest to exploit ICT and e-commerce opportunities. As more women-centred hubs like Anakazi are established, there is evidence of the incremental progress in bridging the technology gap. They are also cardinal in showcasing women role models in digital trade.

The [internet is the driving force behind global trade](#), enabling transactions to take place online, ranging from small-scale informal exchanges to significant supply agreements. Whether through email, e-commerce platforms or digital marketplaces, contracts are conducted digitally. All aspects of formal trade, such as financing, documentation and logistics, depend on the internet for efficient implementation. This reliance on digital processes continues to grow. Whether placing orders through

email, making online purchases, or managing the financial payments associated with transactions, the internet has become an indispensable tool for conducting international trade; connectivity is of vital importance to any success of the digital world.

The theme for this year's international women's day, "DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality", illustrates both the challenges of attaining gender equality using technology, which presents its own implementation complexities, but also comes with opportunities that can support inclusive economic growth and development.

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