Technology as an equaliser to bridge gender gap

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The new era of technology has blurred the lines between physical and digital limitations. Called the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), this modern age has given us incredible opportunities to connect with people all over the world. However, in order to truly unite as human beings, the challenge of women being left behind in various professional fields, especially information technology, needs to be addressed.

Named 'Women in Technology- Time to Close the Gender Gap', a webinar was held in the third day of the World Congress on Information Technology 2021 (WCIT 2021), where such challenges were duly discussed by an all-female panelist. Sonia Bashir Kabir, Vice Chair of United Nations Technology Bank, began the discussion by stating that the assumption of technology dividing us is not true. Human beings have always divided themselves, but in order to consciously unite professionally and digitally, both men and women need to work together and use technology as an equalizer.

Regarding the inclusion of women in private and public IT sectors, Yvonne Chiu, Chairman of Taiwan Privacy Consultant Association, shared her experience when starting out in Taiwan's IT sector, "More than twenty years ago, I was teaching basic Microsoft Office to high school and college students all over Taiwan. People used to call me crazy for doing so, saying I wouldn't make money, but I didn't care. I wanted everyone to have a basic understanding of information technology." She added, "You need to use technology to connect the world. Even though the mindset from back then has changed, a woman still has to work very hard to prove they are good at something." She emphasized how women should fight against such societal restrictions and prove their worth, especially in fields such as IT usually dominated by men.

Dr. Celia Shahnaz, Professor at the Department of EEE, BUET, mentioned how female students can be encouraged to study STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) subjects. "We have to educate our parents and young students first. Parents need to understand that women can contribute positively. We have to tell young girls how engineering can be a wonder in their lives, how they can be designers, make multi-story buildings, build a smart city, promote agriculture, improve healthcare, create better technologies: anything that is needed for the Fourth Industrial Revolution," she said.

Dr. Celia Shahnaz further stated, "Let us connect with the community. Let us go to unprivileged schools to teach about digital implementation. Teach young girls the importance of everyday technology, like community cleaning upgrades, uninterrupted power supply, and solar panel implementation."

"We don't need to tell women to wait for opportunities. As a woman, you should take yourself to a level where everyone will give you opportunities. Emphasize your skill sets, enhance your technical skills, and push yourself to the best of your capabilities," were her words

of encouragement to young girls looking for success in STEM fields.

When asked about critical factors that need to be identified in bridging the gender gap, Professor Xiaolan Fu, Founding Director of the Technology and Management Centre for Development (TMCD), mentioned some key policies. She suggested, "Digital technology is an important equalizer, but there are significant barriers for women in accessing and utilizing meaningful use of technology. So, governments should promote the role of digital technology in building an inclusive society, and invest in digital infrastructure."

According to Professor Xiaolan Fu, authorities should introduce special programs to ensure women, youth, and underprivileged people gain wider access to technology and a more affordable internet. She added, "Training programs should be especially designed for women entrepreneurs to learn the use of modern technology: so they can engage in economic activities and use various platforms to gain further access to the wider world." She further stated that supervision of the digital world is an important step in creating a supportive environment for everyone. "A healthy platform in terms of content and productivity will give people, especially women, the confidence to proudly participate in the digital economy."