Girls in ICT Day

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NEWS

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Introduction

Whenever we hear the word ICT, what immediately comes to mind is technology, new and improved gadgets or machines. We then think of how these gadgets and machines are made and what kind of effort is needed to build them. Many times the word ICT often denotes gadgets and machines that are associated with boys and men. This is because it is boys and men who have a passion for gadgets and machines and are always eager to learn what these things do. On the other hand, girls and women are seen not to have interest in such because in our traditional African society, boys and men are always given the responsibility of fixing gadgets and machines that are broken. Women and girls are left to tend to other household chores.

The same kind of thinking has been extended to school and escalated to the career fields. In school, girls are not always encouraged to take on subjects like physics and chemistry and are often seen to perform poorly in mathematics.

All these subjects are considered part of the STEM subjects. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Boys perform better than girls in these subjects. They therefore pick careers in the fields of engineering, mathematics and the sciences more, whereas the girls go for other careers that do not involve science. This puts the girls who grow up to be women at an unfair disadvantage in STEM careers.
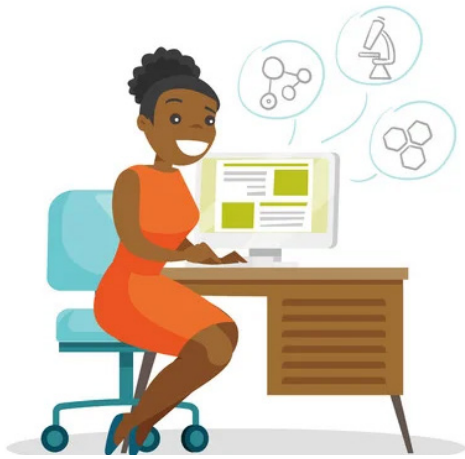
The internet as part of the technology section in STEM is also a very important aspect. According to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 48.3% of females and 69.4% of children between 15-24 years worldwide have internet access. This has encouraged more girls to have an interest in pursuing careers in ICT and STEM.

However, this access is limited because some girls do not have access to regular internet services, moreso girls from rural areas. They also do not have computers or smartphones that enable them to use the internet. For the girls that have access to the internet to spark their interest in ICT-related subjects and careers, they are not safe. These girls face the danger of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The abuse can range from online grooming to child trafficking, child pornography

and many more.

Background

The International Girls in ICT Day was established by the ITU (United Nations, 2022). The ITU and its partners have insisted on working together to develop solutions and ideas that will help lower the barriers for women and girls to access the internet. They also work towards improving online safety for girls and young women.

It is important to know that the number of women using the internet globally is 48% compared to 55% of men (ITU, 2022). If young women and girls are not able to access the internet and feel safe online, they will not be able to develop the necessary skills to engage in digital spaces. The result is that girls and young women have less opportunities to pursue their careers in STEM-related fields.
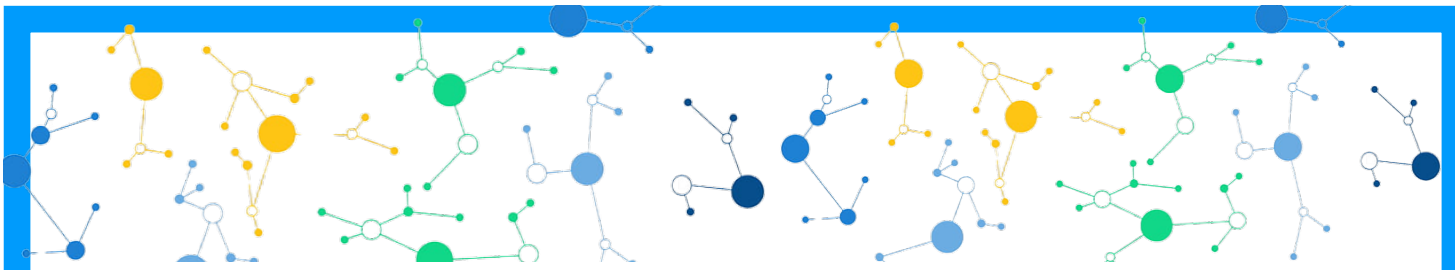
That is why the 2022 International Girls in ICT Day focuses on how to give access and guarantee the safety of girls and young women online. According to the ITU (2022), for women and girls to do well in STEM careers they need safe and reliable access to the internet and digital tools under the theme: Access and Safety.

Focus Areas for Girls in ICT

As the world commemorates Girls in ICT Day, there are some areas that need to be focused on. These are:

1. Equal Access

According to ITU (2022), girls who do not have equal access to the internet are not able to benefit from digital technologies and its many opportunities. In Africa, the sad truth is that girls and young women in most communities are not given the same opportunities in STEM careers because boys are often seen as the suitable candidates. However, this narrative has changed.

In Africa, girls and young women are not given the same opportunities in STEM careers.

2. Accessibility

Accessibility is the ability of all people to be able to reach or use something. ICT innovations have had a wide reach globally with girls and young women not being left behind. People with disabilities have also been catered for in terms of having devices that help them navigate the digital space. In relation to STEM subjects, there has not been significant progress in developing the technology that helps people living with disabilities. There is also not enough data that shows the number of people with disabilities who have a hard time accessing online tools for STEM.


People with disabilities have access to devices that help them navigate online.

ITU (2022) explains that the reason why people with disabilities have a difficult time with STEM related subjects and courses is because science and maths use formulas and diagrams in their modes of teaching and instruction. Girls with visual impairment in schools around the world will have difficulty following through the classes because they cannot see the diagrams and formulas. Therefore, they end up being discouraged from a very young age and they may not want to go into STEM careers.

3. Safety online

Online child abuse has been on the rise, especally during the COVID period. In Kenya for example, 3 in every 10 households have access to the internet. This means that children, girls in particular, also have access to the internet or devices that support internet usage. On the one hand, this is beneficial to these girls because they are able to access school material that is helpful to them. On the other hand, the internet exposes them to the horrors of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) and child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
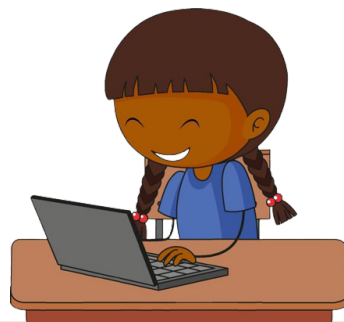
3 in every 10 Households in Kenya have access to the internet.

These kinds of abuses include online grooming, cyberbullying, child pornography, child trafficking, among many others (UNODC). These potential experiences for girls and young women online cause them to feel unsafe online. Therefore, they may feel uncomfortable engaging in STEM careers in future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is evident that technology revolutionised the 21st century and made life easier for all human beings. Women and girls have been, more than ever, encouraged to pursue careers in STEM from an early exposure to ICT in schools and in their homes. However, this has not been a smooth sailing for all girls and young women due to the potential threats of online sexual exploitation and abuse.

The following are some of the recommendations we put forward:

- making sure that online sites are regulated to make it safe for girls and young women to use. The UN, through the WePROTECT Global Alliance model, helps to prevent and respond to online child exploitation and abuse at the country and global levels (UNICEF). This will encourage them to study and get into

STEM-related careers in future.

- make accessible STEM instruction material to all persons with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired. The use of diagrams and formulas should be made easy to interpret and understand for them.
- ensure that there are equal opportunities for girls, especially in Africa, in STEM subjects and careers. These careers and subjects are not just for boys and men.

Lastly, we call for all stakeholders that support girls and young women to create awareness on the importance of giving access and ensuring the safety of women and girls to engage in ICT activities and jobs. The stakeholders also need to encourage the girls and young women within their countries in Africa to take up STEM subjects in schools as there is a lot to offer and gain within the field of ICT.

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