

**Honourable Minister of Telecommunications and Postal Services,
Co-organisers of the panel on “Digital Inclusion for Women’s
Empowerment”
Distinguished Executives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
All protocols observed.**

Good afternoon,

It is with pleasure, that I received and accepted the invitation to speak at this panel, because inclusion resonates with any responsible leader and more so, the transformation that can be made in the status, lives and experiences of women and girls through harnessing the potential of ICTs.

Addressing the gender equality gaps well before 2030 – the benchmark of the SDGs, is as urgent as it is imperative. The greatest gap being in the area of access to technology, due to a number of factors including the high cost of broadband and a lag in reaching the targets with regard to getting girls into STEM streams.

In some parts of the world, even getting a basic education for girls is not guaranteed.

- **Why** is it that even in 2015, women scientists are still seen as an exception?
- **How** is it that female students continue to be – in many cases – discouraged from accessing certain educational opportunities?
- **What** can be done to solve this persisting problem since we acknowledge that there is a gender bias towards careers in science and technology?

I came across this article from the Harvard review, lauding the excitement and support for increasing connectivity in general, but dismayed at the “less celebratory aspect of the digital revolution”: i.e women being left behind!

A few years ago, the *Women and the Web Report* published by Intel pointed to this fact. The potential benefits of bringing women online, are so important that it would be an obvious mistake not to do it. In this report, 30% of women surveyed said they had made use of the internet to boost their income. Keeping in mind that in Sub-Saharan Africa the gender gap in internet access reaches 45%, it is easy to see how precious economic opportunities might be lost for women.

Distinguished Guests,

We are here today, to address the digital gender divide, and to do so in the shortest time possible. It is encouraging to note that the SDGs have made provisions in goals 5 and 9 to end discrimination against women and girls; and to foster industry, innovation and infrastructure respectively.

To be able to achieve this bold development transformation in the area of gender and ICT, a conducive environment is required. One that includes the following points:

1. An overarching global framework agreed upon and signed off by all.
This we now have, as the SDGs were signed by 193 countries of the UN General Assembly and has already come into force.
2. Good leadership that believes in and commits – in word and in deed – to the goal.
3. Good national policies that are inclusive, responsive and articulate, in addressing all discriminatory dispositions and root causes of the gender digital divide.
4. Good institutions with strong capacity to drive this agenda forward, in a truly transformative and equitable manner.
5. A population sensitized and ready to take up and enjoy the benefits of the inclusive digital policy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Rwanda, our government has spared no efforts in bringing to the forefront of our development agenda the principle of gender equality, and the empowerment of women. This has helped to achieve parity, equality and opportunities for those who were historically discriminated against, who were consequently denied access to education and ensuing professional opportunities.

Thanks to our visionary leadership, Rwanda undertook the implementation of gender-sensitive reforms, over a short period of time, which included the constitutional requirement to have 30% of women in decision-making positions.

The principle of gender equality was, and still remains, a priority because we knew that forging a strong and more unified nation, could not be achieved if women were not included in the rebuilding process.

It is because of that vision that various political, economic and social reforms took place, to ensure women would benefit from the same opportunities as men. Such reforms included the equal inheritance rights, so women would no longer be left out of their father's or husband's will, and equal pay for equal work, to help achieve more equity in the workplace.

Our country's transformation and results in gender equality, and the empowerment of women also relied on another important factor: Education. By promoting universal access to education, our country ensured that our girls would not be left behind, and would be able to become as competitive, as their male counterparts.

Today, our overall primary school enrolment is at 96%, with girls' enrolment as high as 98%. Girls are encouraged to consider fields, which were traditionally reserved for men, and currently at the secondary school level, we are registering over 50% of girls in Science Technology Engineering and Math courses.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Our country is progressively seeing an improvement, in the digital inclusion of women thanks to a number of specific national and international initiatives. One of the three commitments of the President's global HeForShe strategy, includes bridging the ICT gender divide within five years.

Other international initiatives, such as the Gender Equality Mainstreaming - Technology (**Gem-Tech**) Award organized by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and UN Women, are great ways to celebrate the use of technology by women, to connect with one another, and by extension, to advocate more effectively for equal rights and opportunities.

As stated by President Kagame, "They (women) are producing digital content showing the critical yet often hidden role that women have played in history. They are making girls more confident about science and technology, so that they have just as much chance to excel in the high-paying, knowledge-based jobs of the future."

A few months ago, I had the pleasure to witness over **100 bright** young girls graduate, from the Women in Science and Innovation Camp at the Gashora Girls Academy. Rwanda was selected, as the first country to host this innovative all-girl technology camp, because of our commitment to promote the **Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEM)** fields, as proven tools for sustainable development.

These bold young women, came from all four corners of the world to undergo, a challenging 3-week hands-on training in computer science, robotics, and entrepreneurship, culminating in the girls' designing their own technology projects, each one of them providing a solution to a safety, health, or environmental concern affecting their communities.

The story of Lillian Uwintwali, is yet another example of the power of education in changing the lives of our young women. Lillian is a 2014 award-winner, who founded M-Ahwii, a Rwandan software development firm, and created a platform where farmers are organised in cooperatives and can connect to markets and apply for financing opportunities. Lillian's story, shows us that young women are contributing to the betterment of our society, thanks to their eagerness to apply technology, to offer home grown solutions.

We have more success stories like Chance Tubane, who set up Tohoza.com, an online directory allowing over 5,000 visitors to search daily for employment, housing, or advertising opportunities.

Or young women like Clarisse Iribagiza, who launched the mobile development firm, HeHe Ltd and was named by Forbes Magazine one of Africa's 30 most promising young entrepreneurs of 2015, is an inspiration and already paving the way for other young women to enter the world of mobile applications.

I have no doubt that Rwanda, and Africa as a whole, has not seen the last of these young and promising female innovators. **Girls, be bold be curious and never doubt your own ability to change things for the better!**

Honourable Invitees,

As our nation was progressively registering new milestones, in girls' education and access to ICT, initiatives coming from the civil society also gained impressive momentum. For instance, the foundation I created called Imbutu, has for the past 10 years been rewarding the best performing girls, in primary and secondary school. To date, over 4,000 **Best Performing Girls** have been rewarded, and a number of them have gone to pursue careers in science and technology both nationally and abroad, further proving that when girls are encouraged, they do indeed go on to accomplish great things, using the existing tools around them. As the field of ICT is the new frontier, we believe it is crucial to empower girls at a young age, with the right technical knowledge, and so we

reward them with a laptop and ICT training to prepare them for the reality of our world.

In addition, this year we partnered with our Ministry of Youth & ICT and Girls in ICT Rwanda in organizing, the exciting competition known as **'Miss Geek'**. This is a platform for young women to develop new technologies to address challenges in Rwandan communities.

As I conclude my remarks, I would like for all of us here today to challenge our attitudes toward, what we think is appropriate for a woman, and ask ourselves:

- If women have shown their ability to develop IT tools beneficial to the entire society, and the world of innovations is limitless, why are we still observing resistance to women pursuing technology fields?
- Could it be that we are perpetuating a cycle of preconceived ideas about gender roles?

You cannot convince me that these notions apply to such a lawless and virtual space.

- And what is holding back our daughters from occupying a space that is open and needs only their creativity and scientific mind to be explored?
- What about men who still control – in many cases— the tools and resources needed to succeed in these fields? Should we agree on their responsibility to further open the doors of STEM institutions to young women?

I believe those are questions both men and women need to answer together, if we are to walk this path toward digital inclusion for women's empowerment.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish you a pleasant evening.