Global Affairs Canada: Feminist Foreign Policy Dialogue

Thank you for your contribution to the feminist foreign policy dialogue. We invite you to provide your contribution below, within the five (5)-page limit

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☐   Overarching considerations
☐   Enhanced diplomatic engagement
☐   Women, Peace and Security (WPS)
☐   Responding to evolving vulnerabilities
☒   Inclusive digital transformation
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Written Contribution:

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Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) applauds the Government of Canada's launch of the Feminist International Assistance Policy in 2017 and its signing of The Charlevoix Commitment to end sexual and gender-based violence, abuse and harassment in digital contexts during its presidency of the G7 in 2018. We are also pleased that the Government of Canada has launched this effort to engage civil society in the development of a Feminist Foreign Policy.

DOT works at the intersection of youth leadership, social entrepreneurship, innovation, and digital transformation to support young women and men to develop and lead solutions to the problems they face in their community. Given this focus, we welcome the opportunity to speak to how Canada can be a global leader in inclusive digital transformation, and share what we have learned about meaningfully engaging young women in digital spaces, and positioning young women as digital leaders.

In the wake of the global pandemic, there is a groundswell of enthusiasm and political will across sectors to take advantage of the opportunity technology provides to scale impactful solutions and better reach underserved groups. The influence of digital technology is only going to accelerate, and while this presents an opportunity, we also know that without engaging women in meaningful ways, and supporting them to access and benefit from digital innovations, they will be left out of any progress. Globally, 433 million women are unconnected and 165 million fewer women own a mobile phone compared with men. At the current pace, universal access will not be reached before 2042. This means a continued significant gender gap in entrepreneurship, STEM, innovation ecosystems, and labour market participation (OECD, 2018). An increase in female employment rates just in OECD countries could boost GDP by over USD 6 trillion (UN Women, 2018).

Digital spaces reflect and affirm the gender inequalities that are felt in everyday life. We believe that any effort to tackle digital inequality must address the root causes of systemic gender inequality in social, political and economic life.

This is of pivotal importance because digital technology can create a snowball effect for young women. For example, online platforms can facilitate knowledge and access to educational or livelihood opportunities, and young women can start businesses; these are opportunities which can position women to become financially independent and build confidence. However, many young women lack access to digital infrastructure, and struggle to gain skills and meaningful experience with ICT that can ensure that they are included in the digital shift.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to foster inclusive digital transformation, as people around the world have relied on digital tools to stay connected to friends and family, work remotely, shift their businesses to online operations, and engage in education remotely.

According to UNESCO, over 72% of students globally have been impacted by school closures, leading to interrupted learning, poor nutrition, social isolation and an increased exposure to violence and exploitation. In response, education is being transformed with digital technology. But that rapid transformation also means that many students are being left behind. The United Nations estimates that 90% of students in sub-Saharan Africa do not

have access to computers and other technological devices, while 82% are unable to connect to the internet. Education systems are only as inclusive as their creators make them.

We suggest that Canada should champion an approach to digital gender inequality that is intersectional, holistic, youth-led, and localized. Any effort that Canada makes should be well funded, and financial investments should go to local and diverse groups, organizations, and initiatives that are working to engage women in digital spaces. Below, we have offered some specific recommendations based on our perspective at the intersection of youth employment and entrepreneurship, digital innovation, and capacity/skills building education.

1) **Canada needs to show up to international forums and collaborative networks that are working towards inclusive digital transformation**

Currently, Canada is not engaged fully with international networks which are already advocating for digital inclusion. There are existing active networks that are working collaboratively to engage women in digital spaces, foster more inclusive ecosystems, and share best practices in building women's digital literacy. For example, DOT is a member of ITU's EQUALS Global Partnership, which facilitates opportunities for learning across a network of digital equality practitioners, strengthening collaboration for greater impact; similarly, DOT is a member of GSMA's Mobile Digital Skills Alliance which is developing best practices and cross-sectoral approaches to digital skills training; DOT is also an endorser and active community contributor to the Principles for Digital Development. We believe that Canada should take a leadership role in convening international forums on digital inclusion in sectors where Canada already has expertise, such as education and health care - particularly for women. In doing so, Canada could work more effectively and in cooperation with stakeholders that are already doing impactful work towards inclusive digital transformation. Our recommendation is that this increased engagement in international forums and networks also include:

- Joining steering committees and bodies working towards inclusive digital transformation.
- Creating an Ambassador for Digital Inclusion, akin to the Ambassador for Peace and Security.
- Become a signatory to the Principles for Digital Development - an internationally recognised set of guidelines for integrating technology-enabled development programs into global cooperation.

2) **Canada needs to foster ecosystems of support for digital gender equality**

At DOT, we have learned that improving young women's digital opportunities necessitates taking an ecosystem approach to understanding the barriers they face and the underlying root causes of gender inequality. Efforts to address digital inclusion must be based on a foundation of collaborative partnerships with organizations on the ground that are interested and experienced in gender equality and digital gender equality.

Moreover, effort needs to be made to engage partners such as financial service providers, Business Development Services (BDS), incubators or business hubs, and employers in gender equity approaches in order to design and deliver services which better support women. Without this ecosystem, capacity-building approaches will only serve to equip women with digital knowledge and skills that they are unable to use because of a lack of ecosystem support and opportunities.

As an example, Digital Opportunity Trust led the *Digital Ambassadors Program* in Rwanda, bringing together donors, private sector partners, and international and local civil society in a global and multi-stakeholder collaboration that recruited digitally-savvy young Rwandan women and men as Digital Ambassadors to deliver digital literacy training and create social enterprises, self-employment, and jobs in the digital economy. In the Rwandan context, access to devices is a major barrier to young women's digital inclusion, as is the prohibitive cost of data services for mobile phones, and the lack of internet connectivity in rural areas. Through partnerships with government, mobile, and internet service providers, DOT worked across sectors to ameliorate these barriers by providing access to digital devices, vouchers for data use, and by building visibility and awareness of these issues within an ecosystem of influencers. As a result, large numbers of women were connected in rural areas throughout Rwanda while gaining critical digital skills; efforts strengthened by investments in infrastructure, civil society collaboration, and government support for resilient digital futures.

Additionally, DOT recommends:

- Consider what partnerships are possible to be able to provide access to ICT infrastructure for everyone, and what kinds of supports women may need to succeed in digital employment or business.
- Ensure these partnerships are rooted in gender equality principles, linked to feminist and women's rights networks, and support the building of partner capacity to work with young women.

3) Design of digital platforms, tools, and skills development should be led by youth, and digital engagement programs should foster young women's leadership

[The Charlevoix Commitment to end sexual and gender-based violence, abuse and harassment in digital contexts](#) commits the G7 leaders to "support removing gender biases in the development of digital platforms and connected technologies from design to end-use."

At DOT, everything we have learned about designing safe and inclusive digital spaces for women comes directly from asking women what they want out of a digital experience. Our commitment to meaningful co-design with women means we are constantly learning from the women we engage with and responding to how their unique needs and preferences shift and evolve.

For example, this co-design process was used to develop *Innojo*, a digital platform designed primarily with women in mind, to support young entrepreneurs to scale their social enterprises from the ideation stage towards product prototyping, development and implementation. Innojo enables emerging social innovators to build a network of like-minded peers and mentors. In partnership with UNICEF Lebanon, DOT has also incubated *Bridge. Outsource. Transform. (B.O.T.)*, Lebanon's first impact sourcing platform. B.O.T. provides youth with access to jobs through online outsourcing, and also offers an opportunity for young people to earn an income by tapping into global market demand for digital skills. B.O.T. was recently scaled to Jordan through partnership between DOT Jordan and UNICEF. Finally, DOT leverages social media to engage with young job-seekers, social innovators, and entrepreneurs.

Through the youth co-design of our GAC-funded Daring to Shift project, young women and men have highlighted important considerations to designing inclusive digital engagement experiences, including:

- Leverage devices and applications young women are already using to bring information closer to them and meet them where they are at. Our co-design process highlighted that women stop using ICT when it is too complex, and that women face a higher opportunity cost when choosing to invest time in learning how to use technology to benefit their life. Recognizing that the digital shift is happening quickly and barriers that prevent women from accessing ICT might take longer to change, the focus now should be on making the process as accessible as possible so as to not worsen digital divides. This includes paying careful attention to local context, including literacy, varied access to devices and ICT infrastructure, and language.

- Ensure training opportunities are reaching women. DOT's research with youth found that there is a perception that there are few training opportunities available to women, and those that are available are not reaching a wide enough group of women.

4) Foster an enabling environment that supports women's digital inclusion, engages family and community in holistic support, and promotes role models

An important facet of supporting young women in digital spaces is recognizing the important role that family and community play in supporting their success. Often, lack of knowledge about the benefits of ICT, a perceived lack of safety for women, and norms about how a woman can engage in digital spaces can lead parents, partners, and other influential people in young women's lives to be unsupportive of their access to and use of digital tools and platforms. It is important to pay attention to young women's enabling environment by engaging family members, community leaders, and peers in learning about the benefits of ICT to shift mindsets to be more supportive and encouraging to young women's digital engagement.

Engaging men and boys in supporting young women's digital inclusion is crucial to establishing this enabling environment. For example, DOT provides gender equality training alongside delivery of digital skills or digital business curriculum, and opportunities for women and men to discuss sociocultural norms, reflect on power and privilege, and apply gender sensitive practices in their own work or business. They then go out into their communities, and are supported to facilitate this gender equality training for other community members. Moreover, while it is important for women to have safe and supportive spaces – and this may necessitate women's only spaces – we have seen the benefit for some young women and men to engage in mixed-gender groups where they can learn and practice their digital skills as peers.

Finally, enhancing the visibility of women in ICT and digital innovation is an important enabler that builds young women's ability to see opportunities for themselves in sectors that they have traditionally been excluded from. DOT has sought to highlight role models in local communities throughout its work; Canada should likewise establish opportunities to recognize women that are breaking gender barriers and advancing ICT and digital solutions in their communities, and support organizations that are already doing this work to elevate women's visibility in digital spaces.

5) Establish safe spaces for women online while recognizing that digital safety is an extension of women's safety in their daily lives.

Online harassment, cyber bullying, and lack of data privacy are of ongoing concern to young women and are major barriers to their access and use of digital platforms and tools. Whether

virtual or not, we need to understand the root cause of online harassment and go beyond the symptoms to look at social norms, attitudes, and systems that are perpetuating GBV for women globally. This means changing the perceptions of women and girls from the ground level all the way to the virtual level. Through education, we can equip young women and men with knowledge and tools to create safe spaces for themselves and their peers, including how to protect their information and reduce their exposure to risk and harassment.

Moreover,DOT's research and work has resulted in several key recommendations about how to ensure young women feel safe and supported online. First, women reporting incidents of tech-facilitated GBV through digital platforms prefer a human response that is empathetic and understanding. Secondly, for young women to continue using online platforms, they require a transparent and explicit process for incident reporting and resolution. Finally, young women need to know that there is a procedure for following-up on reports that have clear action steps. Finally, young women need to feel completely in control of their experience – including how much they share, with whom, and how. Without these features, young women are less likely to use online freelancing and networking platforms due to their safety and security concerns.

Digital Opportunity Trust is pleased to share the above recommendations with Global Affairs Canada as a part of the feminist foreign policy dialogue; these recommendations were developed in consultation with members of DOT's Youth Leadership Advisory Board (YouthLAB) from East Africa and the Middle East.

We are encouraged by an increased emphasis on inclusive digital transformation, and consider this an important and necessary priority. A critical part of making this shift, as we have reflected in our recommendations, is centering the voices, needs, and first-hand experiences of young women. They are on the front lines of the digital divide, the emerging education crisis, and are also on the front lines of their communities leading digital transformation in highly impactful and innovative ways that the international community must learn from, accelerate, and support. We look forward to further engaging with Global Affairs Canada on these matters.