Digital Women empowerment

Dear participants, dear organisers!

- My name is Inese Podgaiska, and I am the Secretary General of the Association of Nordic Engineers. I am also a mother of two, a woman, who grew up in the Soviet Union, went through a teenage crisis while my country Latvia was regaining its independence, studied in Paris, worked as a diplomat in Brussels at the moment of Latvia's accession to the EU and now I am settled in Denmark. I speak five languages.

  I felt on my skin what integration means. I am a mentor, a role model and a certified coach. But why do I tell my personal story to you? This is not only to show that there is always a person hidden behind the presenter but also to encourage women to be vocal about their successes!

1. Introduction: Digital Empowerment of women

I would like to start my talk by paying tribute to Kofi Annan, who said: "There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women". Empowering women is a precondition for our economic growth, political stability, and social transformation.

But, despite political commitment, we still face some barriers. Today, in my speech, I want to draw your attention to 3 specific barriers I experienced during my professional life and observed during my mentoring and coaching. I will also share some solutions that I think are necessary to overcome those barriers.

As a parenthesis and introduction to the barriers, I want to share some statistics. Globally, in the European Union and in the Nordic countries, there is an ambition to "promote digital inclusion, empowerment, and equality in our societies by tackling gender gaps and skills gaps"[1]. The EU Commission's 2021 Women in Digital Scoreboardnumbers indicate that the gap between males and females' internet use skills and digital skills, in general, is relatively small, with differences ranging from 2 to 4%. This is the positive news. But if we dig deeper, we can see huge differences in the regions and EU Member States regarding female participation in

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[1] https://www.norden.org/en/declaration/ministerial-declaration-digital-north-20

the digital economy and society. It poses a significant risk for societal transformation and political stability if we accept that half of the population cannot fully participate in their societies' digital development and life.

Digital empowerment is also closely linked to the diversity gap. In my organisation, which represents more than 500.000 engineers in the Nordic Region, we have a specific focus on attracting more girls and women to STEM. Not only do women contribute to diversifying technological development and innovation, they also contribute to economic growth. The demand for STEM professionals in future cannot and should not be fulfilled by men alone. But today, across the European Union, only 19% of ICT specialists and about one-third of STEM graduates are female. In Scandinavian countries, only about 30-35% of the STEM graduates are women.

To tackle the lack of basic digital skills and of girls and women not choosing a STEM career, **we need to look at what barriers exist**. And in my view, these barriers are not exclusive to the digital and STEM world. They are barriers to women empowerment in general.

2. The First Barrier: Lack of interest and stereotypes

If we want all women to acquire basic digital skills and have more women choose a STEM career, we must have more girls interested in STEM subjects. Cultivating this interest goes hand in hand with breaking down the stereotypes. Research from Denmark[2] and Norway[3] show that the interest in STEM studies should be cultivated at a very early age, during primary school. We need to learn in a fun way and create more opportunities to try Tech and STEM as part of the outside school activities

What can be done in more concrete terms? I think:

(i)   We need an inclusive education system where we go away from what women and men can do and instead focus on what they want, feel attracted to, and what motivates them. We should eradicate the idea that women need to adapt to male environments to succeed in STEM. Instead, we should figure out what is lacking in establishing an attractive and inclusive STEM study environment. In line with this, gender awareness should be an integral part of the teachers' training programmes. **We need to educate the educators.**

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[2] Stereotyper spænder ben for tekniske piger – DEA

[3] https://www.telenor.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Gender-Gap-in-Technology-in-Scandinavia_Full-report.pdf

(ii)   We should create better storytelling about the purpose and what a change STEM education can contribute to – and stop focusing on the nerdy formulas when talking about engineering and other STEM professions. A creative approach for STEM literacy does wonders!

(iii)   I think we must involve parents more and earlier in the discussion – they have a huge influence on their children's choice of education. We learn a great deal of our stereotyping at home - children mirror the parent's distributed roles.

(iv)   And lastly, I call it **Walk the talk** for all women, as we are accomplices in sustaining stereotypes. A woman in a powerful position is often asked how she reconciles her family and professional life. The problem is not only in the question. The problem is also often in the answer. The female leader will usually reply how challenging it is and would come up with different examples of juggling many tasks. By answering the question this way, she justifies the question and contributes to maintaining the gender stereotype. **Walk the talk, set an example – and stop being the stereotype.**

3. The Second Barrier: Self-confidence or believing in your STEM abilities.

According to a survey conducted by the Nordic Council of Ministers[4], 42% of girls/women do not think they have the aptitude for solving maths and technical problems or complete STEM programmes. This is quite a thought-provoking result.

As women, we´re told we need to be self-confident and dare to fail without worrying about others, and it is time for us to stop striving for perfection in everything we do, in everything we are. Easy to say, but how do you do this in practice? It is pretty much the assumption that gaining more confidence goes through self-awareness. However, the ability to believe in ourselves is not a part of the curriculum of our education systems. So, how can we get around this?

(i) Again, we need to rethink our education systems and put the needs of people in the centre. If we want human beings to thrive, understand their own needs and believe in their powers, personal development should be a part of our education systems.

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[4] https://www.norden.org/en/publication/handbook-how-make-science-technology-engineering-and-mathematics-stem-more-appealing, p.12

(ii)   Another important aspect is to teach women to fail by creating safe spaces to discuss and learn from these failures. Failing helps to learn. And we know from the history of science that many important discoveries happened by mistake.

In my view, personal development is the missing block in women empowerment. So my appeal is: **Make sure that you support girls and women in self-realisation and self-actualisation of their inner powers.**

4.   Third Barrier – Equal opportunities

It doesn't matter if we talk about digital empowerment or being a woman in the 21st century. We still face unequal opportunities. They have to be tackled on all levels to create a systematic change in our values, work culture, and mindsets. Even if the region I represent is considered the most gender-equal, women are still not enjoying the same privileges and opportunities as men.

(i)   The key issue is the pay gap and pay transparency. A recent report from the Swedish Association of engineers[5] shows that there is still an unexplainable wage difference

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[5] https://www.sverigesingenjorer.se/globalassets/dokument/remisser-och-rapporter/remissvar/utbildningspolitik/rapport---ron-om-lon-o-kon-2021.pdf

of 4% if we take away all other factors than gender. Many of our surveys also show that women expect a lower wage than their male counterparts in their first employment. How come? Some[6] would argue that women are exposed to "statistical discrimination" because employers expect them not to be able to work as much as their male counterparts. Another aspect is that it is often still a taboo to talk about the paycheck, a taboo often cultivated and sustained by the management to suppress the wages, but pay transparency is crucial for pay equality.

(ii)   Another problem is the inequality in responsibility for the children and home. According to a Nordic Council report[7], fathers in the Nordic countries take from 10 to 30 per cent of the parental leave. And Denmark only last year joined Norway, Sweden, and Iceland and earmarked quotas for paternity leave. Without measures like these, women's pay and pensions will consistently be negatively affected by factors unrelated to their professional skills and experience.

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[6] https://ida.dk/raad-og-karriere/det-koensopdelte-arbejdsmarked/maend-er-bedre-til-at-fortaelle-hvad-de-er-dygtige-til

[7] https://www.norden.org/en/nyhed/earmarked-paternity-leave-effective-way-change-norms

(iii)   And a third challenge - We still lack women in top management positions – This is despite a strong correlation between promoting women into the executive suite and high profitability[8].

If we don't pay women equally, if we don't create equality in the work-life, and if we don't appoint women in leadership, we're wasting human resources.

5.   What can you/we do?

Create networks, be role models, or become a mentor. It makes a difference. It generates the feeling of belonging, provides places to meet, find advice, talk about challenges, create new opportunities and form partnerships. This can help as a remedy against drop-outs. For me, role models and mentors are in a co-creation process, where both parties learn from each other.

Work on awareness-raising campaigns, short visuals and other types of outreach activities – use your channels to spread them. And react when you witness what I call the diversity communication errors: debates with only male participants, the "manels", or promotional governmental policies, featuring women as coffee servers.

Focus on policy influencing, it works, and we must continue to push for political incentives.

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[8] Adler, Roy D. "Women in the executive suite correlate to high profits." *Harvard Business Review* 79.3 (2001).

Currently, our eyes are on the European Commission, as the equal pay directive will be adopted in spring this year. This will set the frame for Europe for many years to come.

To conclude: Women empowerment is a process requiring commitment and responsibility from the political level and employers. It is also a process in which we, women, have a role to play. It is also our responsibility! We cannot continue viewing our lives, careers and finances as less valuable than men's. We cannot continue advancing ourselves by constantly justifying ourselves, and lastly and very importantly, we cannot continue judging the women next to us, especially on their appearance. It doesn't bring us forward!

My final message today is:

We need to remind ourselves that **solidarity among women** is of utmost importance. It takes courage to stand up for yourself and the injustice inflicted on other women, but this is what we must do to take our power back!

I will end with a quote by Maya Angelou: "Each time the woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women!"

Thank you very much!