Google

Now is the time to build a more equitable internet

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Have you heard about the young lawyer in Mexico who doesn't go online much because she's worried her boyfriend will disapprove? The medical professional in India who manipulates her video searches before logging off, so her family members won't judge her choice of content? What about the Brazilian blogger thinking about going offline because every time she posts, she's bombarded with sexual comments?

Because of our geographic distance and cultural differences, it might seem Indonesian women have nothing in common with these women in other parts of the world. But there's one thing that's the same for all of us: one way or another, we have all experienced the unique challenges and risks that women face online.

Now more than ever, the internet provides access to news and information, entertainment and communication, tools and services. But the uncomfortable truth is that the internet in 2020 is still not gender-equitable.

There are more men than women online in two-thirds of the world's countries— and in many cases it's not a matter of choice. Google's "Towards Gender Equity Online" report—conducted in Indonesia and six other fast-growing economies—found multiple, overlapping barriers preventing women from sharing fully in the benefits the internet creates.

The harsh reality is that many women in Indonesia and beyond still can't access the internet on their own terms. They face pressure not to go online or have limits placed on their time, finances and movement. As a working mother, I struggle to even find a time for myself on the internet. These days, when everyone is working and studying from home, bandwidth is lagging, I usually de-prioritise myself and disconnect from the internet. In extreme cases, some women are barred from going online at all. Many women struggle to find relevant content online, with algorithms recommending videos, articles and blogs that skew towards male tastes and interests. There are fewer female role models and female-focused online communities, because women are reluctant to create social media content or share personal information online. Even in their own physical space, women face restrictions on their freedoms online, often needing to delete their search history or use app locks to protect their privacy on shared devices.

Above all, women on the internet fear for their safety, with risks ranging from cyber-stalking to impersonation (like synthetic porn or fake profiles), and the theft and unwanted sharing of photos and data.

Changing this matters both ethically and economically. According to McKinsey, closing gender gaps in Asia-Pacific could add $4.5 trillion to collective regional GDP by 2025—12% more than the business as usual. In our digitalising world, that will only be possible if we make sure that women across the region can use the internet freely and safely.

Governments, business and communities all have a role in clearing away the obstacles to women's progress online—starting with three clear, tangible priorities.

First, those of us in the technology industry need to get better at incorporating women's concerns into the way we build our services and apps, something we're working hard on at Google. Features like incognito mode in Google Go are vital to safeguard women's privacy on shared devices, enabling them to access vital information on health, safety, sexuality and even fashion and beauty, while safety mode on Google Maps can provide an important layer of protection for women using ride-hailing services.

Second, businesses, governments, nonprofits and educators have a responsibility to work together to give women the skills and knowledge they need to navigate the internet confidently. That means partnership-based, grass-roots education programs, ranging from computer science classes for girls in school, to basic digital literacy for new female internet users, to advanced AI skills for women developers. Google's Women Will program—which has trained 450,000 female-led small businesses —is one example of how we can meet that demand; Women Techmakers, a 'train the trainer' program for women developers, is another. We will need many more in future.

Third, all of us as a society have to do more to support and celebrate women's success and female role models online. From entrepreneurs like Sherly Santa in Lombok, who grew her durian business online, to renowned disabled developers like Hastu Wijayasri and creators like Najwa Shihab — an inspiring journalist and one of YouTube's Creators for Change ambassador — it's critical that we lift up women who have used the internet to succeed and can now show a path for others. As we do so, we must step up our efforts to make social media platforms safe places where women can create, learn and find community—and weed out biases that favour male content and preferences.

Building a gender-equitable internet is vital for progress everywhere. But it's especially important in countries like Indonesia where large numbers of people are only just beginning to come online—countries that will account for the majority of the next billion users of the internet and shape the future of the digital economy.

If anything, closing the gender gap online is even more important in a world grappling with coronavirus. With work and travel restrictions making us more reliant on technology, there is a risk of even greater limitations of women's freedoms on the internet. At the same time, as countries look towards economic recovery over the long term, there is no more powerful driver of growth and opportunity than empowered female workers and business owners.

No matter what broader challenges we face, we will be better able to confront them if we advance equality online. An online environment where women are safe, supported, and free to reach their potential won't just mean a better internet: it will reflect a better world with a stronger future. The 2020s should be the decade we make that world a reality.

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