



B-Tech Project: Multi-Stakeholder Consultation on Gender, Tech, and the Role of Business

Time : June 15, 2023, 2pm

Venue: Swissnex, Pier 17, San Francisco

DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE

I. OVERVIEW

This multistakeholder consultation will contribute to B-Tech’s new workstream on gender, digital tech and the role of business, building upon the momentum generated by the recently concluded Commission on the Status of Women’s 67th session, for which the priority theme this year was “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”. The B-Tech Project plans to release a briefing paper which will look at issues at the intersection of women’s rights and gender equality, business, and tech. This consultation will feed into the development of such a practical tool and guidance on gender and digital tech from a business and human rights perspective.

Taking a global approach, the consultation will discuss the key considerations relevant to understanding the implications of the UNGPs for technology companies’ responsibility to respect (and States’ duty to protect) on women’s and girls’ rights, and explore how the UNGPs framework connects with existing tools and resources for the ICT industry on assessing and mitigating impacts on women and girls (and to highlight any gaps); as well as identify outstanding knowledge gaps or other barriers to fully incorporating gender issues within this field.

II. Background

UN Human Rights, under the umbrella of its B-Tech Project, will be convening a multi-stakeholder consultation to discuss gender, digital tech, and the role of business, using the lens of the United Nations Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) applied from a gender perspective. The UNGPs provide the authoritative global framework for the respective duties and responsibilities of governments and business enterprises to prevent, mitigate and address business-related human rights abuses. They also offer a blueprint for how business respect for human rights can support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in line with international human rights standards. The B-Tech Project, launched in June 2019, applies a UNGPs lens and seeks to provide normative clarity and practical guidance on the respective roles and responsibilities of States and technology companies to ensure respect for human rights in the development, deployment, and use of digital technologies.

While there is great potential for new technologies to contribute to the empowerment of women and gender equality in, inter alia, education, employment and communication, there are also very well documented severe risks to women and girls stemming from their use. Examples of such negative impacts include the gender digital divide regarding access to the internet and digital technologies, as well as the lack of women’s equal participation and representation in innovation and development of digital technologies; digital technologies used to incite online violence against women, as well as abuse and harassment; surveillance, censorship and threats to privacy rights, particularly regarding women’s bodily autonomy and intimate lives. Digital technologies have also been reported to amplify and perpetuate gender biases and stereotypes, and leading to algorithmic discrimination – for example, in the context of employment advertising and recruitment tools. These negative impacts all have an intersectional dimension, as women and girls face multiple and intersecting

forms of discrimination based on a variety of factors, such as race, class, literacy, and social, cultural, and economic norms, resulting in both compounded barriers to technology use, and compounded negative impacts.

While these risks vary and are context-specific, a key aspect is that those developing and deploying these digital technologies, i.e., mainly tech companies, are expected to effectively identify, prevent, and mitigate these risks. In that regard, the UNGPs set clear expectations about the respective roles and responsibilities of States and the private sector. Applying the UNGPs framework in relation to the impact of technologies on women and girls can help devise meaningful strategies to tackle them.

III. Objectives of the consultation

The consultation will feed into the development of a briefing paper which will offer practical guidance on gender and digital tech from a business and human rights perspective.

A series of B-Tech foundational papers on all three pillars of the Guiding Principles as applied to the technology sector have been issued, setting out the normative expectations of the UNGPs in relation to digital technologies. Building on the format of these foundational papers, as well as other policy documents, the B-Tech Project plans to conceptualize and produce a briefing paper with the key considerations relevant to understanding the implications of the UNGPs for technology companies' responsibility to respect and States' duty to protect women's and girls' rights online and each actors' responsibility to provide access to remedy. This guidance tool will articulate how the UNGPs framework connects with existing tools and resources for the ICT industry on assessing and mitigating impacts on women and girls (and to highlight any gaps), and identify outstanding knowledge gaps or other barriers to fully incorporating gender issues within this field.

While the consultation, and the guidance tool that B-Tech will be developing, cover the three pillars of the UNGPs, a special emphasis will be placed on the role that technology companies should play to uphold the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, including women's and girls' rights. Through their powerful position across many markets, global and regional technology companies hold important leverage to shape the way in which digital technologies impact women and girls, and bear the potential to adjust their processes in a rights-respecting manner.

IV. Structure

With the participation of invited expert speakers, the consultation will be framed around key questions linked to the three pillars of the UNGPs.

Guiding questions:

1. The State duty to protect

- How does the state's duty to protect the human rights of women apply in the technology sector?
- What are the specific issues for which States should provide appropriate guidance to businesses by recognizing the challenges that may be faced by women?
- What specific actions can States who have recognized the need for enhanced digital policy and improved access to ICTs take to advance digital rights for women and girls?

2. Companies' responsibility to respect

- How does technology companies' responsibility towards women and girls apply regarding impacts stemming from, or being linked to, digital technologies?
- How can a gender lens be integrated into human rights due diligence? Where do companies need to place specific emphasis on gender aspects in their risk assessment processes?
- How do civil society, academia, and collective action initiatives seek to advance respect for women's human rights by technology companies?

- Which are examples of measures adopted by tech companies, including in partnership with civil society, to mitigate risks of abuses of women and girls?
- What measures can tech companies take to increase access to digital technology for women and girls, including the internet, smartphones, and social media, and to close the digital divide?

3. Access to Remedy

- What are the gender-related challenges to the ability of State-based judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms to provide for accountability and remedy in case of human rights abuses relating to technology companies? And what are potential solutions to address and/or overcome such challenges?
- How can technology companies make a more positive and proactive contribution to providing remedy addressing technology-related harms, from a gender perspective?