Keynote speech at the launch of the EQUALs Report on ‘Taking Stock of the State of Gender Digital Equality’

15th March 2019, CSW63 New York

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honor to be with you here today and speak on topics that important to my country Rwanda i.e. Gender and Technology.

Before I get into the substance of my remarks, I want to sincerely thank the EQUALs Global Partnership, especially its founding partners but also all other partners: ITU, UN Women, GSMA, ITC, and UN University, for leading the way in showing us the potential and power of partnerships in resolving global challenges such as the ones we are here to discuss.

My remarks are focused on three areas which are also the action areas for EQUALS,

These areas are: **Access, Skills, and Leadership.**

**ON ACCESS**

Just two weeks ago, Rwanda launched a satellite broadcaster that intends to connect remote schools to the internet. The name given for this satellite- ‘Icyerekezo’ captures the essence of my remarks this morning. In my language, Kinyarwanda, ‘Icyerekezo’ means ‘Vision’. And I believe that the issues highlighted in the report which we are launching this afternoon, will be solved only if we have a vision that seeks to address the fundamental issues of gender inequality in the digital space.

Basic and meaningful access to technology is the building block for us to realize the full potential that technology has to better the lives of citizens, more so for women especially those in rural and agricultural sectors. The report has shown an interesting trend, that ‘irrespective of a country's overall ICT access levels, economic performance, income level, or geographic location, a gender digital divide persists’. I think this shows us that there is a pervasive mindset that works against advancing women’s access, use and ownership of technologies. This is something that we need to deliberate further, and involve a host of partners in different fields such as education, healthcare, and even the security sector.
In the last year in Rwanda, we have seen an increase in internet penetration driven mainly by increased internet coverage and flexible pricing of related products by telecom firms. Mobile penetration in Rwanda now stands at 78.1 per cent. This is encouraging. However, as the Report rightly suggests, we need to think not just about ‘use’ but about ‘ownership’ as well.

In Rwanda, the Ministry of ICT is actively working to address this issue of use vis-à-vis ownership. The Ministry has a countrywide advocacy campaign called ‘Women in Technology’ where experts seek to understand women’s day to day challenges and advise on how technology can be of use to them in their daily activities. Women are also informed of existing e-services and ICT access opportunities.

ON SKILLS

The issue of skills in areas of STEM continues to have a gender-balance problem, as revealed in the Report: ‘women are less likely than men to have advanced digital skills’. One interesting finding/recommendation of the report was the use of ‘alternative pathways’ for training such as coding schools and boot camps. This is one path that Rwanda has chosen as well. Early this year, we launched the first coding academy to train software engineers- the school opened with 60 students, 30 boys and 30 girls. These youth will be trained in software programming, embedded systems and cyber security. Also, this year, Ms. Geek-Rwanda marks its 6th anniversary. Ms. Geek is a technology challenge that aims to inspire more girls into STEM fields. Such innovations continue to inspire confidence in girls to pursue the STEM fields.

As I said earlier, technology is one of the cornerstones of Rwanda’s development Agenda. One of the flagship projects currently underway is the construction of Kigali Innovation City, located on 170 acres in the Kigali Special Economic Zone. The aim of this project is to attract world-class universities, technology companies, biotech firms, and commercial and retail real estate. Already, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), a leading American university in areas of engineering and technology, has set-up a center of ICT excellence worth $10 million dollars. The University has already graduated 145 students since establishing in Rwanda in 2014. This is an example of how public-private ventures are necessary to address issues of skills gap, especially its gender dimension, in developing countries.
ON LEADERSHIP

Indeed, women’s representation remains low in ICT employment, entrepreneurship, and policymaking. The Report puts the figure, on average, that women constitute less than 35% of ICT and related professions. In our view, there is need for consistent political will to involve women especially in ICT policy making. We are proud that in Rwanda, both our current Minister for ICT and Innovation and the Permanent Secretary in the same Ministry are women- one is 37 years old and the other even younger. This demonstrates the commitment that the leadership of Rwanda has in empowering women and ensuring that they are not just at the table, but that they drive the agenda of ICT innovation and policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With these few remarks, let me thank you all for the invitation to be part of this event.