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The Role of Public Policies in Increasing Women's Participation in the Labor Market in the Era of Digitalization: A Cross-Country Analysis

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Abstract

In the digital era, women's participation in the labor market is undergoing significant transformations. While digitalization and remote work offer new opportunities, challenges such as the digital gender gap and the need for reskilling persist. Public policies play a crucial role in addressing these challenges and fostering gender-inclusive labor markets. This study aims to explore how public policies can enhance women's labor market participation by promoting digital skills development, ensuring equitable access to technology, and supporting flexible work arrangements. The research employs a qualitative, desk-based comparative analysis of secondary data from international organizations, including the OECD, World Bank, and ILO, focusing on four diverse countries: Estonia, Germany, Albania, and Rwanda. The findings reveal that integrated, genderresponsive policies—such as digital literacy programs, childcare support, and incentives for flexible work—are most effective in empowering women. For instance, Estonia's "Digital Skills for All" initiative and Rwanda's gender-sensitive policies have increased women's inclusion in ICT sectors, while Germany's childcare infrastructure and Albania's external projects highlight the importance of policy coherence. Persistent barriers include the digital gender divide, unpaid care burdens, and workplace discrimination. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive, cross-country analysis that integrates feminist and intersectional perspectives, offering actionable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to design inclusive and equitable labor market strategies in the digital age.

Keywords: university-industry collaboration, motivational factors, perceived benefits, developing country

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of digital transformation is reshaping labor markets across the globe, altering the nature of work, skills demand, and employment structures. Emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence, automation, and remote work platforms—are introducing both opportunities and uncertainties for workers and employers alike. Within this evolving landscape, gender disparities in access to digital tools, skills development, and participation in high-growth sectors remain a pressing concern. While digitalization holds the potential to bridge some traditional barriers to women's employment, such as rigid work schedules or geographic constraints, it also risks deepening existing inequalities if public policies fail to address structural and social barriers effectively.

Women continue to be underrepresented in digital and STEM-related professions, and they face greater risks of job displacement in sectors most vulnerable to automation. Moreover, limited access to training in digital skills, unequal care burdens, and persistent gender norms hinder their full integration into the digital economy. These trends highlight the urgent need for targeted and inclusive public policies that not only support women's participation in the labor market but also empower them to thrive in a technology-driven world.

This study aims to explore the role of public policies in increasing women's participation in the labor market in the era of digitalization. It investigates how different countries are designing and implementing gender-sensitive policy interventions to promote digital skills development, ensure equitable access to technology, and support flexible and inclusive work environments.

By examining international policy models and analyzing their effectiveness in diverse economic and cultural settings, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the discourse on gender equality in the digital economy. It seeks to provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners committed to building more inclusive and future-ready labor markets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of women in the labor market has evolved significantly over the past decades, driven by demographic shifts, economic transformations, and changing social norms. Despite these advances, numerous studies have documented persistent gender gaps in employment rates, wage levels, leadership representation, and access to quality jobs (Blau & Kahn, 2017; ILO, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Women remain overrepresented in part-time and informal employment and underrepresented in high-skilled, high-paying sectors (Campa et al., 2021). These trends are even more pronounced in developing countries and among marginalized groups, underscoring the intersectional nature of labor market inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Kabeer, 2020).

Digitalization presents a dual reality for gender equality. On one hand, it creates new avenues for employment through remote work, platform-based jobs, and digital entrepreneurship—forms of work that can offer greater flexibility for women balancing paid and unpaid labor (OECD, 2022; Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). On the other hand, it introduces barriers such as the digital gender divide, lower participation of women in STEM fields, and limited access to digital skills training (Bøler et al., 2015). Research indicates that women are less likely to benefit from digital job opportunities if existing inequalities are not addressed (UN Women, 2022; Hafkin & Huyer, 2021). These challenges are particularly critical in rural areas and among older women, who often face compounded disadvantages (Hilbert, 2019).

From a theoretical standpoint, feminist policy analysis critiques gender-blind approaches and advocates for gender mainstreaming in policy design (Lombardo & Meier, 2006). This perspective is critical for understanding how ostensibly neutral digitalization policies may inadvertently reinforce gender hierarchies. Complementarily, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) emphasizes that women's experiences of digital exclusion are shaped by overlapping identities such as race, class, and geographic location (Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, rural women in developing countries face significantly higher barriers to digital inclusion than their urban counterparts (Gurumurthy et al., 2018). Furthermore, the care economy framework highlights how unpaid care responsibilities—disproportionately borne by women—constrain their labor market participation (Folbre, 2018). Digitalization does not automatically alleviate this burden; without supportive policies, it may even blur the boundaries between work and home, intensifying time pressures (Craig & Churchill, 2021).

In this context, public policies emerge as a key mechanism for promoting gender-inclusive digital transformation. Policies that provide digital literacy training, subsidize childcare, ensure affordable internet access, and support flexible work arrangements can significantly improve women's labor market outcomes (EIGE, 2021; Mammen & Paxson, 2021). Moreover, proactive policy frameworks that mandate gender mainstreaming across employment and education policies have shown measurable impacts on closing gender gaps in several countries (Staab, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these policies varies significantly depending on institutional capacity, political will, and socio-economic context (Périvier, 2018).

While existing literature has extensively explored gender gaps in the labor market and the implications of digitalization, there is still a lack of comparative, policy-oriented research that systematically examines how different countries address these issues through an integrated theoretical lens. Most studies focus on individual case studies or specific policy instruments (e.g., childcare subsidies or digital training), leaving a gap in understanding how the interplay of feminist, intersectional, and care economy perspectives shapes cross-country differences and transferable best practices (Micheletti, 2023). This study seeks to contribute to that gap by offering a comparative analysis of public policies across diverse national contexts, with a focus on their impact on women's digital labor inclusion through a multidisciplinary theoretical framework.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on the literature review, this study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical lens to analyze public policies aimed at increasing women's participation in the labor market in the digital age. Drawing from gender studies, labor economics, and public policy analysis, the framework emphasizes the role of institutional design and state intervention in addressing systemic inequalities. Feminist policy analysis, for instance, critiques gender-blind policy making and advocates for gender mainstreaming—an approach that integrates a gender perspective into all stages of policy design, implementation, and evaluation (Lombardo & Meier, 2006). This perspective highlights that neutral policies often perpetuate existing inequalities if they fail to consider gender-specific needs and structural constraints.

Intersectionality theory, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), further deepens the analytical scope by emphasizing how overlapping identities—such as gender, race, class, and age—interact to produce complex forms of disadvantage in the labor market. In the context of digital transformation, this means that women from different socio-economic backgrounds may experience digital exclusion in varying ways, requiring tailored policy responses. Intersectional analysis also underscores that one-size-fits-all policies are insufficient in closing the gender gap and that inclusivity must be embedded in policy architecture.

Another important dimension of the theoretical framework is the care economy, which highlights how unpaid care responsibilities—predominantly carried by women—significantly influence labor market outcomes. According to this approach, labor market policies must be evaluated not only on employment indicators but also on how they redistribute care work and promote work-life balance. Public support for childcare, parental leave, and flexible work is seen as essential infrastructure for gender equality, particularly in a digital economy where boundaries between work and home are increasingly blurred.

Finally, the study adopts a policy analysis framework that focuses on responsiveness, accessibility, and effectiveness in the digital context. This includes evaluating policies based on their capacity to enhance digital literacy, enable remote work, reduce gendered digital divides, and adapt to the evolving nature of employment. The digital age demands dynamic and inclusive governance models, where gender-responsive policies are not add-ons but core components of labor market strategies.

4. METHODOLOGY

To operationalize the theoretical framework, this study adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach, grounded in desk research and comparative policy analysis. The selection of a qualitative, desk-based comparative method is justified by the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to understand the nuanced role of public policies in enhancing women's labor market participation in the digital era across diverse contexts. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of policy frameworks, institutional dynamics, and socio-

cultural factors that influence gender outcomes, which might be obscured in purely quantitative analyses. Additionally, the cross-country focus and challenges in obtaining standardized, comparable data on gender and digitalization make a qualitative comparison more practical and insightful for identifying transferable practices and contextual barriers.

The research relies on secondary data from international organizations, official policy documents, and academic literature. Sources include reports and statistical indicators from institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, ILO, UN Women, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). These provide gender-disaggregated labor market data, digital inclusion indexes, and documentation of policy initiatives relevant to the research topic.

The comparative analysis examines four countries—Estonia, Germany, Albania, and Rwanda—selected based on their diversity in digital readiness, gender policy frameworks, socio-economic development, and geographic representation. This selection allows for a multifaceted understanding of how varying levels of digital advancement, policy maturity, and cultural contexts shape women's inclusion. Estonia represents a digitally advanced European nation with integrated gender-sensitive policies; Germany exemplifies a high income country with robust labor protections and evolving digital gender initiatives; Albania illustrates a developing country with nascent digital strategies and structural challenges; and Rwanda showcases a pioneering approach to gender-inclusive digital policymaking in Sub Saharan Africa.

To ensure a systematic comparison, the analysis focuses on key dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: (1) digital skills development, (2) access to technology, (3) care infrastructure, and (4) flexible work arrangements. The following table summarizes these dimensions and their indicators:

Table 1. Dimensions for comparative policy analysis

Dimension	Description	Examples of Indicators
Digital Skills Development	Policies aimed at enhancing women's digital literacy and technical skills	National training programs, scholarships, mentorship initiatives, STEM outreach
Access to Technology	Initiatives to ensure equitable access to digital tools and internet	Subsidized devices, affordable broadband schemes, public internet access points
Care Infrastructure	Support for childcare and redistribution of unpaid care work	Childcare subsidies, paid parental leave policies, elderly care services
Flexible Work Arrangements	Policies promoting remote work and flexible schedules	Legal frameworks for telework, tax incentives for employers, guidelines on work-life balance

Each country case is analyzed descriptively based on these dimensions to identify public policy measures that promote digital skills for women, improve access to technology, support care infrastructure, and encourage flexible work arrangements.

While the study does not include primary fieldwork or empirical testing, it provides a synthesis of existing evidence and formulates comparative insights and practical recommendations. Limitations include the dependency on publicly available sources, variation in data quality across countries, and the inability to measure direct causal effects. Nonetheless, the research offers a relevant and context-aware contribution to the policy discourse on gender equality in the digital economy.

5. CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Guided by the methodological framework, this section presents a comparative analysis of four selected countries to understand how public policies influence women's participation in the labor market within the context of digitalization. Estonia, Germany, Albania, and Rwanda were chosen based on their diversity in terms of economic development, digital infrastructure, gender equality progress, and public policy innovation. The comparison aims to identify both effective strategies and persistent challenges in designing inclusive policies that empower women in the digital age, with an evaluative focus on why certain measures succeed in specific contexts and their potential for transferability.

5.1. Estonia

As one of the most digitally advanced countries in Europe, Estonia has implemented forward thinking policies that integrate digitalization with social inclusion. The "Digital Skills for All" program promotes digital literacy among underrepresented groups, including women, through free training modules and e-governance services. Estonia's policy framework emphasizes remote work flexibility, online access to public services, and gender-sensitive budgeting. These efforts have contributed to higher-than-average female labor force participation in ICT related sectors (approximately 30% of ICT employees are women, compared to the EU average of 18%) [Eurostat, 2023]. However, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within the tech industry, indicating room for improvement in career advancement policies. The success of Estonia's approach can be attributed to strong institutional capacity, high digital infrastructure coverage, and a culture of innovation, which may make elements like e-governance and digital literacy programs transferable to other digitally advanced economies.

5.2. Germany

Germany presents an interesting case of a high-income country with strong labor protections and evolving gender policy frameworks. The country has invested heavily in expanding early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and offering parental leave schemes that encourage paternal involvement. In the digital sphere, programs like "Women in Tech" and "Digital Women's Day" promote visibility and participation of women in STEM and digital entrepreneurship. Despite these efforts, part-time employment remains disproportionately high among women (around 47% of employed women work part-time, compared to 11% of men) [Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2023], which affects long-term career progression and

earnings. Germany's case illustrates the importance of integrating work-life balance measures with proactive employment incentives. The contextual factors here include cultural norms around caregiving and a robust welfare state, which may limit the direct transferability of such policies to countries with less developed social protection systems.

5.3. Albania

As a developing country with significant structural and institutional challenges, Albania is in the early stages of adopting digital transformation policies. Recent government initiatives have focused on digitizing public services and expanding internet access, but gender-specific dimensions remain weakly integrated. Some progress has been made through projects supported by international organizations, such as UNDP and GIZ, which offer digital skills training for young women and rural populations. Nevertheless, traditional gender roles and limited childcare infrastructure continue to hinder women's full participation in the labor market, especially in rural and peripheral areas (female labor force participation is around 52%, with only 15% of women in ICT-related roles) [INSTAT, 2023]. Albania's experience points to the need for stronger policy coherence between digital development, education, and gender equality. The fragmentation of policies and reliance on external funding highlight challenges in transferability; successful elements from other contexts, such as digital skills training, may require adaptation to local institutional capacities and cultural norms.

5.4. Rwanda

Rwanda has emerged as a leader in gender-sensitive policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country has adopted constitutional gender quotas and implemented programs that aim to empower women in technology and entrepreneurship. Initiatives like the "Girls in ICT Rwanda" program and Digital Ambassadors Program provide training and mentorship for young women, especially in rural areas. These policies have contributed to one of the highest female parliamentary representation rates globally (61%) and increasing female participation in ICT-related employment (approximately 35% of ICT professionals are women) [National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2023]. However, gaps remain in access to infrastructure and long-term employment stability, which require sustained investment and monitoring. Rwanda's success is driven by strong political will and community-based implementation, making its gender quota and mentorship models potentially transferable to other developing countries with similar commitment levels.

5.5. Comparative Insights and Policy Transferability

The comparative analysis reveals that while the digital context and policy maturity vary greatly among countries, certain cross-cutting lessons emerge:

- **Digital skills development** is most effective when combined with targeted outreach to marginalized women and integrated with labor market needs (e.g., Estonia and Rwanda).

However, the transferability of such programs depends on existing infrastructure and educational systems. For instance, Estonia's model may be adapted in other EU countries, while Rwanda's community-based approach could work in similar low-income settings.

- **Childcare support and flexible work arrangements** are crucial enabling conditions, especially in contexts like Germany and Albania, where unpaid care work affects women's career trajectories. Germany's subsidized childcare has reduced the motherhood penalty but requires high public investment, making it less transferable to resource-constrained countries without phased implementation.
- **Visibility and representation matter:** Programs that actively promote women's leadership in digital sectors (e.g., Germany's visibility campaigns, Rwanda's mentorship networks) enhance long-term inclusion. These are highly transferable as they rely on advocacy and can be scaled with minimal resources.
- **Policy coherence is key:** Piecemeal or fragmented policies tend to have limited impact, as seen in Albania, whereas integrated and well-funded frameworks (e.g., Estonia) yield more sustainable results. Transferring policies requires alignment with national priorities and institutional capacities.

The contrast between Germany's structural maturity and Albania's policy fragmentation underscores the role of institutional capacity and cultural norms. For example, Germany's part-time work issue persists due to deep-rooted gender roles, while Albania's digital gaps stem from infrastructural deficits. Citing outcome data, such as female digital employment rates, helps quantify these disparities and reinforces the need for context-specific adaptations. Ultimately, policy transferability hinges on identifying core principles (e.g., gender mainstreaming) rather than replicating exact models, allowing for customization to local economic, cultural, and digital conditions.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of Estonia, Germany, Albania, and Rwanda highlights a number of effective policy measures that have positively influenced women's participation in the labor market within the digital economy. The most impactful policies appear to be those that adopt an integrated and gender-responsive approach, combining digital skills development, access to affordable childcare, and support for flexible work arrangements. In Estonia, for instance, digital literacy programs linked with e-governance tools have empowered women to enter the digital workforce, especially in the public sector. In Rwanda, the combination of training, mentorship, and political commitment to gender inclusion has created a favorable ecosystem for women in ICT-related sectors.

Germany's case demonstrates that while high investment in childcare infrastructure and parental leave policies creates a solid foundation for gender equality, their effectiveness in supporting full-time female employment depends on cultural norms and workplace practices. The

persistence of part-time work among women—often influenced by traditional family roles—suggests that economic incentives alone are insufficient without broader shifts in organizational culture and social expectations.

Albania illustrates the limitations of fragmented policy initiatives. Although externally supported projects have introduced digital skills training for women, the absence of a coordinated national strategy and limited state capacity have hindered scalability and long term impact. This underscores the importance of institutional coherence and sustained political will in translating good intentions into effective outcomes.

Several common barriers continue to affect women's labor market inclusion across countries. The digital gender gap remains a central challenge, manifested in unequal access to devices, internet connectivity, and quality training opportunities. Gender discrimination—both implicit and structural—persists in hiring, promotion, and pay practices, particularly in male dominated sectors such as tech. Additionally, unpaid care work continues to fall disproportionately on women, limiting their availability for full-time or high-responsibility roles. While some countries (e.g., Germany) have introduced family-friendly policies, their uptake and impact vary by socioeconomic status, cultural background, and employer engagement.

The cultural, institutional, and economic context significantly shapes policy outcomes. In highly digitalized and welfare-oriented societies like Estonia and Germany, policies tend to be more structured, well-funded, and monitored. In contrast, countries like Albania rely more heavily on donor support and face constraints related to infrastructure, budgeting, and policy coordination. Rwanda, despite its lower income status, shows that strong political commitment to gender equality can compensate for limited resources, especially when paired with community-based implementation models.

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest that policy transfer between countries must be approached with caution. While certain principles—such as investing in digital skills or promoting flexible work—are broadly applicable, their implementation must be context specific. For example, remote work incentives that succeed in Estonia due to strong broadband access may have limited effect in rural Albania without parallel investments in infrastructure.

In conclusion, effective public policies for enhancing women's participation in the digital labor market require a combination of inclusivity, adaptability, and cross-sector coordination. There is no universal formula, but there are transferable elements and best practices that—when aligned with national realities—can support progress toward more equitable and future-ready labor markets.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comparative findings and the existing literature, this section offers a set of policy recommendations aimed at promoting women's participation in the labor market in the context of digitalization. These recommendations reflect both the successful elements observed in selected country cases and the structural challenges that persist across different economic and cultural contexts.

7.1. Designing Integrated Gender-Responsive Digital Policies

To ensure that the benefits of digitalization are shared equitably, public policies must be explicitly gender-responsive. This means embedding gender analysis into the design, budgeting, implementation, and evaluation of all labor market and digital development policies. Governments should institutionalize gender mainstreaming mechanisms across ministries, with clear accountability indicators and monitoring frameworks. Digital strategies should not be gender-neutral but must explicitly address the different needs, access barriers, and aspirations of women, particularly those from rural or marginalized communities.

7.2. Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Effective policy implementation requires active collaboration between government institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations. Governments should lead in setting regulatory frameworks and allocating resources, while the private sector can offer scalable solutions in training, recruitment, and workplace innovation. Civil society plays a crucial role in outreach, community mobilization, and advocacy for inclusive policies. Public private partnerships (PPPs) can be leveraged to develop inclusive digital ecosystems that support women-led entrepreneurship, mentorship networks, and career advancement pathways in technology fields.

7.3. Expanding Women's Access to Digital Skills and Technology

Digital skills development must become a central pillar of national employment and education strategies. Governments should invest in accessible and affordable digital literacy programs, with targeted outreach to women and girls through schools, vocational training centers, and online platforms. Particular attention should be paid to closing the digital gender gap by subsidizing access to devices, internet connectivity, and technical training in underserved regions. Incentive schemes such as scholarships, cash transfers, or free certification can boost participation rates among women with limited economic means.

Moreover, digital inclusion policies should go beyond basic skills and promote advanced competencies, such as coding, data analysis, cybersecurity, and AI literacy, to ensure that women are not confined to low-value digital roles but can access high-growth sectors of the digital economy.

7.4. Promoting Flexible Work Models and Supporting Care Infrastructure

The promotion of flexible and remote work arrangements—accelerated by the digital shift—can significantly enhance women's ability to balance paid and unpaid work. Governments should encourage employers to adopt hybrid and flexible schedules through tax incentives, legal protections, and pilot schemes. At the same time, it is crucial to strengthen care infrastructure, including subsidized childcare, elderly care services, and paid parental leave, so that women are not forced to choose between career and caregiving responsibilities.

The recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work must be integrated into labor market policies. This can be achieved by valuing care work in national accounting systems, funding social care services, and promoting gender-equal caregiving norms through public campaigns and educational curricula.

These policy recommendations emphasize that closing the gender gap in the digital labor market requires a comprehensive and intersectional approach. Isolated interventions are not enough; sustained political will, inclusive governance, and cultural transformation are equally essential. Policymakers should aim to create resilient and adaptive frameworks that address current disparities while preparing for future technological disruptions.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the critical role of public policies in increasing women's participation in the labor market during the era of digitalization, with a focus on identifying effective practices across diverse national contexts. Through a qualitative, comparative policy analysis based on secondary data of Estonia, Germany, Albania, and Rwanda, the study revealed that gender-inclusive digital policies—particularly those combining skills development, flexible work arrangements, and care infrastructure—can substantially enhance women's economic empowerment. However, success is largely dependent on policy coherence, institutional capacity, and the broader cultural environment in which these policies are embedded.

Among the key findings, the research highlighted that:

- Targeted digital skills training programs are most impactful when tailored to women's socio-economic realities and supported by infrastructure investments.
- Flexible work models, if paired with strong care policies, allow women to better reconcile paid work with unpaid responsibilities.
- Collaborative governance models, involving state, private sector, and civil society, tend to produce more sustainable and scalable solutions.
- Persistent barriers such as the digital gender divide, unpaid care burdens, and gender biases in hiring and promotion practices continue to limit the effectiveness of many well-intentioned

policies.

This paper contributes to the academic literature by integrating feminist and intersectional theoretical perspectives with comparative policy analysis in the context of digital transformation. It moves beyond single-country or sector-specific evaluations to offer a cross national perspective that enriches our understanding of what works—and under what conditions—to promote gender equality in evolving labor markets. From a practical standpoint, the paper provides actionable insights for policymakers and development practitioners designing future-ready labor market interventions.

Importantly, the findings of this study align with and support the achievement of key global policy frameworks, notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, the emphasis on enhancing women's digital skills and labor market participation directly contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by empowering women and reducing disparities, and to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by promoting inclusive employment opportunities in the digital economy. The policy recommendations offered— such as integrated gender-responsive policies, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and support for care infrastructure—provide concrete pathways for countries to advance these goals in the context of digitalization.

For future research, several avenues are worth exploring. Longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of digital inclusion policies on women's career trajectories. Additionally, qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with policy beneficiaries, would provide richer, lived-experience insights into how women navigate opportunities and constraints in the digital economy. Further comparative research could also examine how intersecting factors—such as disability, ethnicity, or migration status—shape women's access to digital labor opportunities across different settings.

In conclusion, while digitalization presents new possibilities for reshaping gender dynamics in the labor market, it does not guarantee inclusion by default. Only through intentional, inclusive, and context-sensitive policymaking can these possibilities be transformed into lasting progress toward gender equality and social justice.

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