

# POLICY BRIEF 02

In response to the United Nations Global Digital Compact (Zero Draft, 1 April 2024)

## Global Digital Compact: Cluster 2. Digital literacy, skills and capacity

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This policy brief is part of a six-part series produced by students participating in the Erasmus+ blended-intensive program “Digital Constitutionalism and the UN Global Digital Compact” hosted at the University of Bremen.

Between March and June 2024, around 30 students and ten instructors worked to build and put to work transversal skills in a transnational research-based learning and policy-engaged learning setting. As part of the program, students worked together for a week at the University of Bremen and participated in the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) 2024 policy conference.

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## Executive Summary

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In today's digital age, digital education is paramount, yet defining digital skills and literacy remains a challenge. The Zero Draft's aim for 80 percent proficiency in basic digital skills for both genders is ambitious but lacks a clear definition of these skills. A feminist perspective is essential to address gender disparities and promote women's empowerment in digital education.

This policy brief emphasises the need for precise definitions of digital skills at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels. It advocates for inclusive language to ensure no one is left behind. The Global Digital Compact calls for an open, human-centred digital future, highlighting the necessity of digital skills for personal and professional growth. As workplaces become more digital, fostering an inclusive environment for digital education is crucial for innovation and productivity.

Examining the Zero Draft through a feminist lens reveals issues in terminology and conceptual clarity, particularly in defining basic digital skills and avoiding stereotypes that marginalise women. Recommendations include providing a clear definition of basic digital skills, reintroducing digital literacy per UNESCO's standards, recognizing women's strengths, and using gender-inclusive language. These steps will help the Digital Constitutionalism Network promote gender equality and societal advancement globally (UN Women, 2024; UNESCO, 2024; IT for Change, 2024).

## Introduction

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In an era where technology penetrates every aspect of our daily lives and work environments, the importance of digital education cannot be overstated. However, one of the primary challenges we face is the lack of a uniform and universally accepted definition of digital skills and literacy. Consequently, the goal of achieving 80 percent of both women and men with basic digital skills in the Zero Draft appears overly ambitious, particularly given the absence of a clear understanding of what constitutes digital skills. Moreover, the feminist lens is essential to remove women from the category of the disadvantaged, highlighting the necessity of addressing gender disparities in digital education (UN Women, 2024).

This policy brief focuses on a critical problem in the realm of digital education: the lack of a clear and universally accepted definition of basic digital skills. This ambiguity hinders efforts to address gender disparities and promote inclusivity in digital education. Without a precise definition, it becomes challenging to design effective policies and interventions that cater to the diverse needs of individuals, particularly women who often face barriers to accessing and utilising digital resources. Therefore, the policy brief aims to delineate a comprehensive definition of basic digital skills while emphasising the importance of adopting a feminist perspective to address gender inequalities in the digital space.

Therefore, this policy brief underscores the urgent need for clarity in defining digital skills and digital literacy, as well as distinguishing between "intermediate" and "advanced" levels. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of adopting inclusive language and perspectives to address gender disparities in digital education effectively, ensuring that no one is left behind.

The Global Digital Compact shares a vision for an open, free, and human-centred digital future. Their aim is to bring together corporations and multistakeholder companies to work collectively on a set of shared principles such as connectivity, internet unification, data protection, human rights online, as well as artificial intelligence regulation (EEAS, 2023). There is an emphasis on the knowledge of basic digital skills.

The education of basic digital skills is a crucial topic in today's digital landscape. It is almost impossible to go about our daily lives without interacting with digital technology. Thus, digital skills are not only essential for personal development and empowerment but also for professional advancement. Furthermore, digital skills foster creativity and innovation. As organisations increasingly move towards digital workspaces and integrate digital technologies, workers who can adapt and grow with these technologies are highly desired. Therefore, creating an inclusive and equal environment for the education of such skills is vital for fostering societal growth and enhancing productivity and creativity (UNESCO, 2024).

## Feminist Perspective: Addressing Gender Disparities in Digital Education

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Positionality is a crucial aspect to consider when discussing feminist perspectives, particularly when all the authors of this policy brief are women. As women, we bring unique insights and experiences to the discourse on digital education, understanding firsthand the inequalities and challenges faced by

women in the digital space. In the realm of digital education, gender disparities persist, posing significant barriers to women's empowerment. Women are often underrepresented in STEM fields and face discrimination and biases in digital workplaces and educational settings. Moreover, access to digital resources and opportunities for skill development is unequal, further exacerbating the digital gender divide.

Through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that addressing these disparities requires more than just acknowledging women as vulnerable subjects. It entails recognizing the agency and capabilities of women and advocating for their equal participation and leadership in the digital sphere.

The proposed definitions of basic digital skills must reflect this feminist perspective by not only addressing the technical aspects but also considering the socio-cultural factors that shape women's experiences in the digital world. Basic digital skills should encompass not just technical proficiency but also critical thinking, digital safety, and the ability to navigate and challenge gender biases and stereotypes online.

Reintroducing digital literacy as a continuation of basic digital skills aligns with UNESCO's definition and emphasises the importance of empowering women with the knowledge and skills to fully engage in the digital society. By recognizing women as strong actors rather than marginalised groups, we are calling for the affirmation of their agency and contributions to the digital landscape.

Additionally, adopting gender-inclusive language is essential to ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender identity, feel represented and valued in discussions surrounding digital education. By embracing a feminist perspective and advocating for the agency of women, the Digital Constitutionalism Network can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and empowering women in the digital age.

## Current Standing

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While the Zero Draft is an innovative and powerful pioneer in the discourse regarding digital governance, the lack of a clear definition of the term "basic digital skills" remains an element that requires addressing, particularly when examined through a feminist lens. This lack of clarity poses a

significant barrier to the effective implementation of the Zero Draft, especially concerning its potential impact on gender equality and the empowerment of marginalised communities.

Examining the definitions of digital skills provided by reputable organisations such as UNESCO, UN Women, and IT for Change underscores the urgency of addressing this issue. UNESCO defines digital skills as encompassing the ability to access, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically, with an emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving (UNESCO, 2024). UN Women emphasises the role of digital literacy in empowering women and promoting gender equality, highlighting the capacity to use digital technology for various purposes within a knowledge-based society (UN Women, 2024). Meanwhile, IT for Change focuses on digital competence as a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for leveraging digital technologies in learning, work, and daily life, particularly emphasising bridging the digital divide and empowering marginalised communities (IT for Change, 2024).

The divergence in these definitions underscores the multifaceted nature of digital skills and the importance of recognizing their intersectionality with gender and social equity. While UNESCO's emphasis on critical thinking aligns with broader educational objectives, UN Women's focus on empowerment highlights the specific needs and challenges faced by women in accessing and utilising digital resources. Similarly, IT for Change's emphasis on bridging the digital divide underscores the imperative of addressing structural inequalities in digital access and literacy.

Furthermore, the initiatives undertaken by organisations like IT for Change, UN Women, and UNESCO highlight global efforts to promote digital literacy and skills. These initiatives encompass curriculum development, training programs, and advocacy for policy change, with a shared emphasis on critical thinking, digital safety, and leveraging technology for social good. However, the absence of a coherent definition of 'basic digital skills' in the Zero Draft undermines the potential effectiveness of such initiatives, particularly in addressing the specific needs of marginalised communities and promoting gender equality.

In light of these considerations, it is imperative for the DCN to incorporate a comprehensive definition of 'basic digital skills' that reflects the diverse perspectives and priorities outlined by organisations like UNESCO, UN Women, and IT for Change. This inclusive approach is essential for ensuring that the DCN effectively addresses the needs of all individuals and communities, particularly those most vulnerable to digital exclusion and marginalisation. By embracing a feminist lens in shaping the

discourse around digital skills, the DCN has the opportunity to become a transformative tool for promoting gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development on a global scale (UN Women, 2024).

## Criticism

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When closely examining paragraphs 11 and 12 of the GDC's Zero Draft, we find notable issues with the terminology and ideas presented. This critique focuses on two main issues: exact wording and the lack of a clear definition.

Paragraphs 11 and 12 of the Global Digital Citizenship Initiative (GDC) Zero Draft present notable discrepancies in terminology usage and framing. Firstly, while the title of the cluster emphasises "digital literacy" distinct from "skills," this distinction fails to manifest within the subsequent paragraphs. Instead, the draft exclusively employs the term "digital skills," neglecting the nuanced understanding implied by the term "digital literacy."

Moreover, the draft's classification of women and girls as a marginalised group implies an inherent lack of ability and independence, perpetuating stereotypes and limiting opportunities for their empowerment. By framing women and girls solely within the context of marginalisation, the draft overlooks their agency and potential contributions. Additionally, the binary categorization of citizens into female and male overlooks the experiences and needs of non-binary individuals.

Paragraph 12 introduces the concept of "digital skills" without providing a clear definition, thereby impeding understanding and implementation. The absence of a precise definition hinders efforts to implement their goals and put them into practice. Furthermore, the lack of differentiation between "digital skills" and "media literacy" obscures the distinct competencies and knowledge domains encompassed by each concept. Without clear delineation, policymakers and stakeholders may struggle to prioritize initiatives and allocate resources effectively.

Additionally, the draft's categorization of digital skills into "basic," "intermediate," or "advanced" levels lacks specificity and fails to account for the capacities of those levels. Without a nuanced understanding of skill development trajectories and contextual factors, interventions may fail to

adequately support individuals in navigating the digital landscape and participating meaningfully in digital society.

In summary, addressing the deficiencies in terminology usage and conceptual clarity within paragraphs 11 and 12 is essential for enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of the GDC Zero Draft. By articulating clear definitions and recognizing the diverse experiences and needs of all individuals, the draft can better equip policymakers and stakeholders to develop targeted interventions that promote equitable and empowering digital citizenship for all.

## Recommendations

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Based on the criticism, we recommend the following points for improvement:

1. Include a precise definition of basic digital skills to implement them efficiently and make a clear distinction between intermediate and advanced digital skills. Our proposal is to define basic digital skills as follows:
  - "Basic digital skills mean mastering the haptic use of technical devices. More precisely, this means being able to turn a cell phone and a computer on and off and use them in their basic functions. These basic skills relate to being able to use the devices to search for information and communicate via the Internet, as we consider these functions to be everyday uses."
2. Reintroduce digital literacy in the discussion as a continuation of basic digital skills, aligning with the UNESCO definition. Our suggestion is to add a new point for this, which could be formulated as follows:
  - "Following the successful implementation of basic digital skills, we want to focus on expanding digital literacy. We are pursuing this according to the UNESCO definition."
3. Reframe women as strong actors rather than marginalized groups, acknowledging their competencies and contributions. This can be done with a minor change in wording but a significant impact on understanding. Our proposal is to rewrite point 11c as follows:
  - "Target and tailor capacity-building for women and girls and empower them in their competencies as well as children and youth, older, disabled, and persons belonging to

marginalized groups, and take the views of each into account in the design and implementation of programs."

4. Finally, we propose a gender-inclusive language that includes all genders and is not limited to men and women. This can be easily implemented by also mentioning people with other gender identities when referring to men and women or by using gender-neutral language and speaking of people instead of individual genders.

By implementing these recommendations and fostering a comprehensive understanding of digital skills, the Digital Constitutionalism Network can pave the way for inclusive and empowering digital education, fostering gender equality and societal advancement on a global scale.



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