

# REGIONAL COOPERATION

## FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH ICT:

*Interview with Jennifer Britton, Coordinator and Lead Technical Adviser on ICT for Development (ICT 4D), CARICOM Secretariat, and Co-founder of Caribbean Women in ICT (CWIC)*

### **What is the role that ICTs can play for fostering a more inclusive and equitable Caribbean?**

Over the past decade, there has been increasing awareness that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be powerful, crucial instruments for advancing economic and social development. ICTs have improved interaction between governments, private sector and citizens. They have also catalyzed communication and networking between people on a global scale. The 'beating heart' of the Caribbean Community surrounds communication, connectivity and conversations.

Given the efforts of all CARICOM Member States and Associate Members, we are on our way to a more inclusive and equitable Caribbean Community. However, as pervasive as ICTs have become in both type and access, sadly, a digital divide has emerged. This digital divide threatens to grow and will become unmanageable unless key attention and resource mobilization is provided to SIDS and other developing countries.

Differing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is also a noticeable trend. In some societies, rapid vaccine progress, digital leaps, and a return to pre-pandemic growth herald better prospects for 2023 and beyond. Others societies such as SIDS could be weighed down for years, if not decades, by these struggles of finding new sources of economic growth.

It is paramount that all our interventions be mindful and intentional. Some key interventions include access to education, facilities for education regarding entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, and other government health resources. Governments partnering with private telecommunication companies could develop discrete programmes targeting women and elderly who are disadvantaged (e.g. Providing discounted or refurbished devices, work from home programmes). They can also facilitate better mobile services and infrastructure in rural areas. Providing accessible computer sites within communities or in schools is another intervention to bridge the gap in the use of ICT. A number of these plans originated or have been encapsulated in the development of the



CARICOM Regional Digital Development Strategy (RDDS) approved in 2014.

### Could you share a general overview of the current realities surrounding women in ICT in the Caribbean?

Without girls and women, and ICT, CARICOM would not be able to achieve a unified community that is inclusive, resilient and competitive, sharing economic and social prosperity. A 2021 report<sup>1</sup> by UN WOMEN advised: “The crippling economic and social fallouts of the pandemic threaten to derail hard-earned gains towards the sustainable development goals. While everyone has suffered, COVID-19 has forced women into greater social, economic, and physical insecurity than men.” At the onset of 2023, we also see a global wave of layoffs in the tech industry which, sadly, is impacting women at a disproportionately higher rate than men. A primary risk is that more women will exit the tech industry.

Currently, we do not have the data to see how the global actions are impacting women in the CARICOM region, but there is no doubt that there will be impact. Perennial challenges surrounding the realities for women include the fact that there is still not a representative number of women in tech leadership roles. In some cases, there are more questions than answers: What will the 2030 labor market look like for women? What policies should we enact to support the labor market access for women? Are we effectively harnessing the power of new technologies, such as AI and Big Data to narrow gender gaps? How do we solicit men for partnerships around the issues which beset women in the CARICOM region?

### What do you see as main opportunities for advancing the participation of women in ICT?

Advancing the participation of women in ICT is a multi-faceted, multi-layered challenge. At the empirical level, three main opportunities could be:

1. Making access to ICTs (connectivity, devices, applications) low or zero cost for women, particularly disadvantaged women;
2. Providing funding and support to women and girls networks across the region to ensure the research, sharing of best practices, education, safety and other capacity building efforts;
3. Making the ICT sector attractive for women and girls through mentorship, school programs beginning in kindergarten, providing information on the wide range of career opportunities, narrowing the gender wage gap, including male advocates.

### What work has CARICOM been leading to engage women and girls in ICT, or ICT for social inclusion?

There has always been a vibrant gender desk at the CARICOM Secretariat, which has supered several initiatives related to women in the region.

One of the very visible outputs of the work of women is ‘The CARICOM Triennial Award for Women’, established in 1984. Through this award, our community honors Caribbean female leaders who have contributed to the socioeconomic and sociocultural development of women in the Region and of Caribbean people. There is also the CARICOM Girls in ICT partnership, which was approved by CARICOM ICT Ministers in February 2022 and has been the convenor of successful Girls in ICT programmes.

The CARICOM Digital Skills Taskforce, approved by the Council on Human and Social Development, has spent a good deal of time ensuring that the needs of women and girls are amplified in its work since 2021. A digital skills survey will be administered in 2023 and the regional ICT Sector Gap analysis project will begin in 2023 to provide data for future projects.

As female empowerment and ICTs touch the root issues of inequalities, CARICOM has also been working to meet the need for a more collaborative, multi-sectoral involvement. Some of the existing partnerships surrounding ICT for development/digital development are:



<sup>1</sup> Summary Status of Women and Men Report - The Impacts of COVID-19

- The CARICOM Digital Skills Taskforce
- CARICOM Girls in ICT partnership
- COTED ICT Single ICT Space Working groups

All CARICOM heads approved the Single ICT Space in 2017, which was recommended by the CARICOM Regional Digital Development Strategy (RDDS). One of the five main pillars in the Single ICT Space is “bringing technology to the people and transforming them to digital citizens and entrepreneurs”, and speaks directly to the engagement and empowerment of women and other disadvantaged groups.



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Jennifer Britton is currently Deputy Programme Manager and Lead Technical Advisor on ICT for Development at the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat. She is also the Co-founder of Caribbean Women in ICT (CWIC) and focal point for the CARICOM Girls in ICT partnership and the Digital Skills taskforce. She is an ICT advocate passionate about exploiting the power of ICT for sustainable human development.