

FT View

Digital literacy

AS the world goes digital it becomes increasingly more important for populations to be digitally literate. In Sri Lanka, about 42% of the population is digitally literate and women lag behind at 38%. In addition, only the Western Province has a digital literacy rate of about 40%, with other provinces lagging behind significantly, and the Eastern Province coming in last. It is therefore important for the Government to focus on policies that will push up digital literacy rates to increase access to opportunities.

Digital literacy is central to reducing social and economic inequalities and improving education, health, job opportunities, and empowerment prospects around the world. The growth patterns was revealed in the Department of Census and Statistics' annual report of computer literacy (2018) released on Wednesday.

According to the report, digital literacy stood at 42.4% compared to 29% for computer literacy for the year 2018. However, computer literacy has only recorded marginal growth, with 0.4% increase in 2018 compared to 28.6% 2017.

The report surveys both computer literacy and digital literacy of Sri Lankans each year, and point to the Western Province leading the island in both computer and digital literacy, with 40% of the population considered computer literate. The Southern Province came held second position with 30% with the Eastern Province ranked lowest with 14.8%.

Internet access offers a powerful avenue for people around the world to assert their right to education, and to claim social, economic and political opportunities for empowerment. But half the world's population is still offline. Most of these 3.9 billion people are women, and most are in developing countries with a significant number even being in urban areas.

Not knowing how to use the internet continues to be a significant barrier to digital inclusion, particularly for women and girls. Among the urban poor, women are 1.6 times more likely to cite lack of know-how as a barrier to their internet access and use. Although ICTs are a powerful tool for developing literacy skills and accessing education, progress on providing internet access and digital literacy training in public schools has been painfully slow. The Government should act urgently to prioritise delivering digital literacy training as a critical component of school literacy curriculum across all education levels, along with reading and writing.

They can do this by putting digital skills and education (particularly for women and girls) front and centre of policy agendas. Programs should be designed to boost the confidence and interest of girls, and focus on empowerment and rights, not just technical abilities. Providing internet connectivity to all public schools and invest in ICT training and support for teachers. Replacing expensive proprietary textbooks and learning materials with Open Educational Resources, pairing digital literacy with digital security and information literacy, equipping students to protect themselves online and to create and critique (not just consume) content are some of the other ways.

Analysing and addressing reasons for high female drop-out from STEM subjects and enhance post-secondary STEM opportunities, especially for girls and young women is another important need. Taking steps to eradicate the gender gap in access to higher and tertiary education by ensuring that women have equal access to tertiary education opportunities is important and in Sri Lanka English knowledge is also an aspect to consider. Sri Lanka has done well in reading and writing literacy and it's time to extend this success to digital literacy for a prosperous future.

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page 14
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