

Closing Address by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India at the ASOSAI Symposium on "Digital Public Infrastructure and Gender Divide – Issues of Inclusion and Accessibility"

**Distinguished delegates, esteemed speakers, and honoured guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

- ❖ As we draw this symposium to a close, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to each one of you for your participation in this insightful and thought-provoking session. The topic we have discussed – the intersection of digital public infrastructure (DPI) and gender inclusion – is of immense relevance today, and the discussions we have had highlight the pressing need for action in this area.
- ❖ The theme of this symposium is not just relevant; it is urgent as approximately 850 million people around the world lack any official identification, digital or otherwise, and around 85 million unbanked adults receive government payments such as pensions and social support in cash¹. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the flaws in the "digital by default" approach, which is often driven by austerity. This strategy shifts the burden of public services onto individuals, families, charities, and local governments, while marginalizing vulnerable

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/10/12/creating-digital-public-infrastructure-for-empowerment-inclusion-and-resilience>

populations, particularly disabled people, who are left struggling to access essential services.

- ❖ Despite the fact that most people live in areas with broadband coverage, 33% of the global population—approximately 2.6 billion people—remain offline². The barriers to connectivity are numerous and persistent: the cost of data and devices, a lack of digital skills, and inadequate infrastructure all contribute to this exclusion. Encouragingly, the gender gap in mobile internet adoption has narrowed since 2020, with women adopting mobile internet at a faster rate than men. However, this gap is still significant. Women are 15% less likely than men to use mobile internet, and around 785 million women remain offline, 60% of whom live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa³.
- ❖ Digital public infrastructure (DPI) is crucial in addressing these challenges for several inter-related reasons:
- ❖ Digital public infrastructure (DPI) is fundamental to most digital interactions, providing a foundational layer for services like identity verification and payments, thereby avoiding the need to build new

² <https://www.weforum.org/impact/digital-inclusion/>

³ <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/>

systems for each service. It integrates policy, processes, and technology, enabling individuals to control their data and allowing small businesses to leverage transaction histories for credit access – known as the "digital stack." DPI also facilitates innovation by enabling governments and private sectors to focus on new solutions, with open standards and APIs ensuring efficient communication across systems. While DPI doesn't require public ownership, governments play a vital role in ensuring it serves the broader public interest.

- ❖ Colleagues, in this context, the theme overview presented by SAI India highlighted the core issues at hand: accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity. It also emphasized the critical role public audits can play in promoting gender inclusion.
- ❖ Mrs. Lakshmi M. Puri's keynote address underscored the importance of gender-sensitive policies in the design and implementation of DPI. Her insights into policy reforms and innovative solutions were inspiring and have laid a strong foundation for future action. The presentations from our distinguished delegates – representing Indonesia, Israel, Malaysia, Oman, and Thailand – added further valuable perspectives on how Supreme Audit Institutions are addressing these issues. Their diverse approaches remind us that while

the challenges may vary across regions, the goal of creating inclusive, accessible, and equitable digital systems is universal.

- ❖ Colleagues, addressing the gender divide in digital public infrastructure requires a multifaceted approach. This is not just a technological challenge; it is a question of equity and fairness. As Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), our responsibility extends beyond the traditional role of auditing financial resources. Auditors can assess whether DPI is truly serving its purpose by examining whether it benefits underserved populations. The insights auditors provide can highlight areas where governments must improve, ensuring that DPI bridges societal divides rather than widening them.
- ❖ As we move forward, I am confident that the insights gained from today's discussions will guide us in fostering truly inclusive digital ecosystems. I urge each of you to take these lessons back to your respective organizations and contribute to building a world where digital technologies empower, rather than exclude, individuals.
- ❖ Let us remember, that bridging this gap is not just about technological innovation—it is about recognizing the rights and needs of every individual.

❖ I leave you with this thought from Audre Lorde: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” As we work to bridge the digital gender divide, let us celebrate the diversity that strengthens our societies and commit to creating a world where no one is left behind.

Thank you.

(737 words)

Ladies and Gentlemen

- ❖ As we come to the close of this Symposium, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of you for your participation in what has been a highly insightful and thought-provoking session on the topic that is of immense relevance today – the intersection of digital public infrastructure and gender inclusion.

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- ❖ The theme of our symposium reflects not just the pressing need of our times but also a call for action. We stand at the crossroads of unprecedented digital advancement, and yet, the gender divide continues to pose a significant challenge. Ensuring that digital public infrastructure is accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all is a matter of utmost importance.
- ❖ The overview provided by SAI India set the stage by emphasizing the core issues at hand – accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity in the digital realm. It highlighted the role that Public audits can play in ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into the design and implementation of DPI projects. Auditors can assess whether governments are adopting a gender-responsive approach in their DPI strategies, ensuring that women’s specific needs and challenges are

taken into account, which may involve evaluating aspects like (i) access to Digital Services; (ii) affordability of the cost of digital services; (iii) improvement of digital literacy through government programs; (iv) monitoring progress of the DPI policies taking into consideration the gender-disaggregated data.

- ❖ Thus, by focusing on these areas, audits could provide their governments with valuable insights on where improvements are needed to reduce the gender divide and promote gender equality in digital spaces.
- ❖ The overview also highlighted the role of Auditors in assessing that the designs of the DPI projects are inclusive and accessible by ensuring whether;(i) the investments in DPI infrastructure are reaching underserved areas; (ii) DPI projects are accessible for users with physical disabilities; (iii) governments are engaging with stakeholders while designing and implementing DPI projects; etc.
- ❖ Mrs. Lakshmi M Puri's keynote address further augmented these points by underscoring the critical role of gender-sensitive policies in the design and implementation of digital public infrastructure. Her insights on policy reforms and innovative solutions were inspiring and have laid a strong foundation for our future discussions and actions.

- ❖ The presentations made by the distinguished delegates from Indonesia, Israel, Malaysia, Oman, and Thailand have provided us with invaluable perspectives on how different regions are tackling this issue. The diverse approaches showcased today remind us that while the challenges may vary across regions, the ultimate goal of creating inclusive, accessible, and equitable digital systems remains universal.
- ❖ Ladies and gentlemen, addressing the gender divide in digital public infrastructure is not just a technological or economic challenge – it is a matter of social justice. The responsibility to bridge this gap does not fall solely on governments but requires collaboration among international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and most importantly, our Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs).
- ❖ As SAIs, our role extends beyond the traditional mandate of auditing financial resources. We must now also look into auditing digital inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring that no one is left behind. We must assess whether digital public infrastructure is serving its intended purpose and benefiting all, particularly the underserved populations.
- ❖ The discussions today also highlighted the evolving challenges posed by the rapid advancement of digital technologies and their intersection with issues of gender inclusivity. While digital public infrastructure

offers unprecedented opportunities to promote access and equality, it is evident that the gender divide persists across many regions of the world. We must continue to address these gaps, ensuring that digital solutions are truly inclusive and accessible to all.

- ❖ The journey to achieving this inclusivity requires a multidimensional approach, where public policy, technological innovation, and accountability mechanisms play a pivotal role. As Supreme Audit Institutions, we hold a unique responsibility in ensuring that the objectives of digital public infrastructure initiatives are aligned with the principles of inclusiveness and equity. Our audits must increasingly focus on whether these infrastructures are being developed and implemented in a way that bridges, rather than widens, societal divides, especially for women and marginalized groups.
- ❖ As we move forward, I am confident that the insights gained today will guide our efforts in fostering digital ecosystems that are truly inclusive. I urge each one of you to take back these learnings to your respective organizations and institutions and help in making our world a more inclusive and equitable place.
- ❖ Before we conclude, let me take this opportunity to once again express my deep appreciation to *Mrs. Lakshmi M. Puri*, for her remarkable

keynote address. Her decades of experience in gender equality and sustainable development provided us with a solid foundation for today's discourse. Mrs. Puri's insights into how digital infrastructure can promote gender inclusivity while also fostering growth and innovation were indeed invaluable.

- ❖ I would like to acknowledge the representatives of the SAIs who presented today – your efforts and dedication to addressing the theme of this symposium have added immense value to our collective understanding. Your contributions have also enriched us all on how to address the digital gender divide in diverse contexts.
- ❖ As we move forward, I trust that the deliberations held today will inspire meaningful actions within each of our respective nations. The theme of this symposium reminds us that the future of governance and development must be both **inclusive** and **accessible** – and that digital technologies, when designed and deployed with this in mind, can be a powerful force for positive change.
- ❖ In closing, I extend my heartfelt thanks to all the delegates, speakers, and organizers for your participation, your contributions, and your commitment to making this event a success.

❖ Thank you all for your engagement and for making this symposium a success.