



The Transformation of Affirmative Action Policies: A Strategy to Enhance the Gender Empowerment Index in the Digital Era

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Abstract: *The transformation of affirmative action policies in the digital era serves as a strategic step to improve the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) and accelerate gender equality in Indonesia. These policies focus on enhancing women's access to economic, political, and educational sectors, leveraging opportunities provided by digital technology. However, several challenges remain, such as limited internet access, low digital literacy, patriarchal social norms, and underrepresentation of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) sectors. The government has implemented several initiatives, including a 30% quota for women's representation in parliament, empowering women-owned MSMEs through Kredit Usaha Rakyat (KUR), and offering scholarships to increase women's participation in STEM and technology fields. In addition, affirmative policies within state-owned enterprises (BUMN) aim to promote female leadership in strategic positions. Despite some progress, the gender gap in the digital economy and the risk of gender-based violence online remain significant issues that require further attention. Policy recommendations include improving access to technology and digital literacy for women, providing incentives for companies that promote gender equality, and strengthening protection against online gender-based violence. Collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society is essential to ensure the successful implementation of affirmative action policies in the digital era. This transformation is expected not only to enhance the IDG but also to empower women to actively contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic development.*

Keywords: *Affirmative action, Gender Empowerment Index, STEM, gender equality, digital literacy, female leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, women's empowerment has become a primary focus of development at both national and global levels. However, gender inequality remains a significant challenge, especially in access to education, employment, and political participation. The Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) measures women's involvement in the economic, political, and decision-making sectors. Although progress has been made, the IDG still indicates the presence of gender disparities, particularly in leadership positions and formal economic participation (Prakitri & Widyastuti, 2020).

Affirmative action has become one of the policy approaches used to address this inequality. This policy focuses on providing greater opportunities and access for women through quotas, recruitment priorities, or specialized training programs. In Indonesia, some examples include the 30% quota for women in parliament and economic empowerment initiatives for women through the MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) program (Mudiyati Rahmatunnisa, 2016). Globally, affirmative action is also implemented in countries like Norway, where public companies are required to have at least 40% women on their boards, and in South Africa through the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment

(BBBEE) policy targeting marginalized groups, including women (Archibong & Utam, 2020).

The development of technology and digitalization has introduced new dynamics in the context of gender empowerment. The digital era offers new opportunities to enhance the IDG through policy innovation. Technology enables women to access digital education, online markets, and tech-based skill training that were previously inaccessible. Additionally, digital platforms create spaces for women to participate in political and social decision-making through social media and online advocacy campaigns.

Nevertheless, digitalization also presents new challenges. Women often face digital barriers such as limited access to technology and the internet, as well as the risk of online gender-based violence (Rita Mukherjee, 2015). Reports from the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) show that gender gaps in digital literacy remain an obstacle in many developing countries, including Indonesia. Therefore, there is a need to transform affirmative action policies to focus not only on increasing women's participation in conventional sectors but also on integrating technology utilization as part of the strategy to improve the GEM (Furtado et al., 2021).

This transformation involves adopting affirmative action policies relevant to the digital era, such as providing incentives for companies that employ women in the technology sector, establishing start-up incubator programs for women, and offering digital literacy programs for women in rural areas. Developed countries like Canada and Germany have demonstrated significant results from digital training and tech-based women's empowerment programs, which have improved women's involvement in the economic sector. Indonesia can adopt these practices to strengthen national policies in achieving women's empowerment goals (Onsongo, 2009).

The transformation of affirmative action policies into the digital era is not only a response to changing times but also a strategic step to enhance the Gender Empowerment Index. Appropriate policies will enable women to not only participate but also excel in economic, social, and political sectors, thereby achieving sustainable and inclusive gender equality.

Gender equality is a crucial development goal for many countries, including Indonesia. Although the IDG in Indonesia has improved, structural challenges remain, especially in women's participation in politics, the formal economy, and decision-making processes (Vasandani et al., 2022). World Bank data reveals that women's labor force participation in Indonesia reached 53.3% in 2023, far below the 81.9% participation rate for men. This

disparity indicates the need for more proactive policies, such as affirmative action, to support the improvement of the GEM.

The transformation of affirmative action policies in the digital era presents opportunities but also significant challenges related to achieving the Gender Empowerment Index. One of the biggest barriers is the gap in access to technology between women and men, particularly in rural areas and low-income communities (UNDP, 2009). Data from the World Bank indicates that women in developing countries often have more limited access to the internet and technological devices than men, hindering their full participation in the digital ecosystem.

Affirmative action policies in the digital sector have not yet fully addressed the need to narrow this technological gap. Without intervention, women will remain marginalized within the digital economy. While digital technology creates opportunities for women's empowerment, it also brings risks such as cyber gender-based violence. Women frequently face threats such as bullying, harassment, and unauthorized dissemination of personal data (Dr. R.O. Soetan, 2001). This situation discourages women's participation on digital platforms and negatively affects IDG outcomes. Current affirmative action policies have yet to integrate comprehensive legal protection and security measures to safeguard women from cyber violence.

Many affirmative action initiatives remain normative without clear implementation strategies, especially in the digital sector (Archibong & Utam, 2020). Although there are quotas for women's participation in politics and the economy, their application in the technology sector is still limited. The lack of synergy between national and regional policies, along with minimal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, has hampered the effectiveness of these policies (Afandi, 2019).

Some countries have successfully promoted women's participation in technology through affirmative action. However, in Indonesia, women remain marginalized in the technology industry and digital innovation. The absence of special training and scholarships for women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) reduces their chances to engage actively in digital transformation (Santoso, 2014).

Social and cultural barriers, such as patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, continue to hinder women from actively participating in the digital sector. Many Indonesian women face social pressures that limit their opportunities to develop skills and careers in technology. Affirmative action policies are often insufficient to change the cultural norms that obstruct gender equality (Dr. R.O. Soetan, 2001).

The transformation of affirmative action towards the digital era is crucial not only to improve the GEM but also to ensure that gender equality can be achieved in an inclusive and sustainable manner. This study aims to identify key factors contributing to low IDG outcomes and propose effective affirmative action policies to strengthen IDG performance in the digital era. These policies will enable women to utilize technology to enhance their roles in the economic, social, and political sectors, thus contributing to more equitable national development.

2. METHODS

This study uses secondary data methods, which involve collecting data from existing sources published by institutions or other parties. The purpose of this method is to obtain relevant information from various sources without having to conduct primary data collection in the field. John Scott (1990), in his book *A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research*, emphasizes that using secondary data allows researchers to utilize existing documents as information sources, particularly in social research. According to Scott, secondary data analysis is essential because it offers opportunities to examine historical trends and patterns across different contexts without the time-consuming process of primary data collection (Allen, 2017).

Bryman dan Bell (Alan Bryman, 2007) in *Business Research Methods*, state that secondary data methods are highly useful for business and social research. They argue that this method is not only efficient in terms of time and cost but also strengthens research validity by enabling cross-temporal and cross-location comparisons. Martina (2018) highlights that secondary data is very helpful in policy research, as it allows researchers to evaluate existing policies using official data from government institutions or international organizations. However, she also warns that researchers must critically assess the potential biases and limitations of the secondary data used (Martins et al., 2018).

Boslaugh (2007), in *Secondary Data Sources for Public Health*, points out the benefits of secondary data use in public health research. According to Boslaugh, secondary data provides deeper insights without the need for conducting surveys or experiments, but it comes with challenges, such as limited control over data quality and consistency. (Boslaugh, 2007). Reason Chivaka (2018) notes that secondary data provides access to rich and diverse sources of information, such as census data and national surveys. Chivaka also emphasizes the importance of selecting relevant data that aligns with research objectives, as not all secondary data can be adapted to the specific needs of each study. (Reason Chivaka, 2018).

The steps taken in this research include identifying and collecting relevant data from official documents, scientific journals, and policy reports. The data is systematically gathered with a focus on the topics of affirmative action and women's empowerment. The collected data is validated by reviewing its quality and credibility, examining the publication year, the authority of the publisher, and the context of data collection. A descriptive approach is used to analyze the data to identify patterns, comparisons across time or regions, and connections between affirmative action policies and IDG development. Comparative analysis techniques are applied where possible to compare with other regions that have succeeded in implementing similar policies. The analysis results are used to formulate conclusions and policy recommendations to strengthen women's empowerment efforts in the digital era. These findings are then connected to relevant theories and frameworks on gender empowerment.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Women's empowerment in the digital era involves utilizing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to help women develop their potential, make informed decisions, and improve both personal and community well-being. Good access to ICT enables women to participate in the digital economy, grow online businesses, and gain new education and skills. Platforms such as Alibaba and Etsy have allowed many women worldwide to become successful entrepreneurs, even in industries previously dominated by men.

However, significant challenges remain in narrowing the digital gender gap, especially in developing countries. According to UNICEF and UN Women, women have less access to the internet and technological devices than men and face obstacles in developing digital skills (UN Women, 2024). In many countries, women are more likely to be employed in the informal sector or face discrimination in technology careers and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. This exacerbates labor market inequalities and hinders women from reaching their full potential in the digital era.

Addressing this gap requires various initiatives, including expanding affordable digital access, enhancing digital literacy, and providing incentives to companies that hire women in the technology sector. Affirmative action policies in the digital sector must also account for online safety for women, mitigating the risks of cyber gender-based violence. These steps are essential to creating a more inclusive and sustainable digital ecosystem and improving future Gender Empowerment Index outcomes.

Addressing this gap requires various initiatives, including expanding affordable digital access, improving digital literacy, and offering incentives to companies that employ women

in the technology sector. Affirmative action policies in the digital sector must also consider online safety for women by mitigating the risks of cyber gender-based violence. These measures are essential to creating a more inclusive and sustainable digital ecosystem and enhancing future achievements in the Gender Empowerment Index. This transformation not only depends on government efforts but also requires cross-sector collaboration, involving businesses, civil society, and international organizations, to ensure that women have equal opportunities and can fully utilize technology in their lives (Aranda-Jan & Qasim, 2022; Robles et al., 2023)

This condition is reflected in the achievements of the Gender Empowerment Index attained by Indonesia, which shows progress.



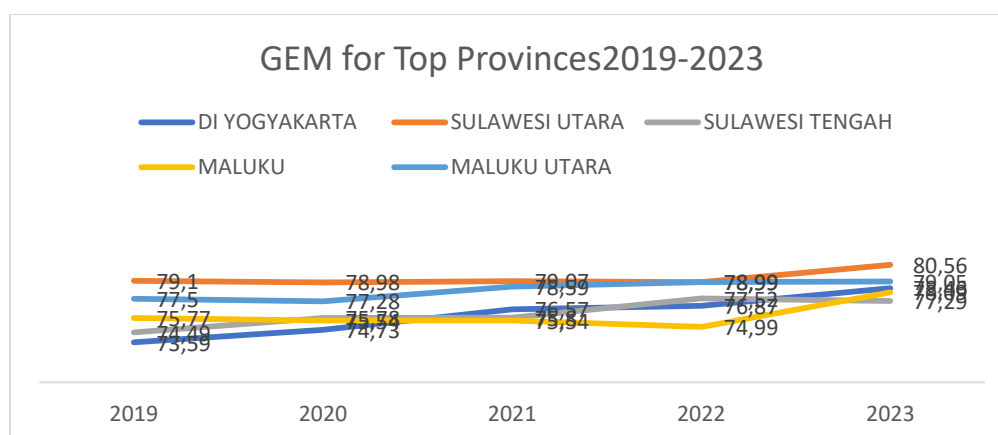
Source : BPS,2024

Based on Indonesia's Gender Empowerment Index (IDG) data, there has been a gradual increase over the last five years, from 75.24 in 2019 to 76.9 in 2023. The IDG measures women's participation in various sectors, including economy, politics, and education, as well as their involvement in decision-making processes. Although the increase has been gradual and not significant every year, this data indicates continuous efforts in women's empowerment, including through affirmative action policies, access to education, and improved economic and political participation. The trend of increasing IDG from 75.24 in 2019 to 76.9 in 2023 reflects progress in empowering women, though there remains room for further improvement. Policies focusing on digital inclusion, protecting women from gender-based violence, and promoting greater political participation need to be strengthened.

According to the World Bank, advancements in the digital economy have significantly contributed to women's empowerment. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

has reduced entry barriers for women in trade and business, such as through e-commerce platforms that allow them to start businesses with minimal capital and leverage digital connectivity to access markets. (Aranda-Jan & Qasim, 2022). Digital transformation opens up opportunities for women to develop new skills in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), although women's involvement in this sector remains low globally.

UN Women highlights that affirmative action policies, such as the 30% quota for women in parliament and economic inclusion policies, play a crucial role in increasing women's participation in the public and economic sectors. However, the implementation of these policies in Indonesia still faces challenges, particularly related to social and cultural norms that hinder women's effective participation (Sicat et al., 2023). At the national level, the progress in IDG (Gender Empowerment Index) is not mirrored at the provincial level. Among all provinces in Indonesia, only five have achieved IDG levels surpassing the national average: DI Yogyakarta, North Sulawesi, Central Sulawesi, Maluku, and North Maluku. The improvements in these provinces have been quite significant from year to year.



Source : BPS, 2024.

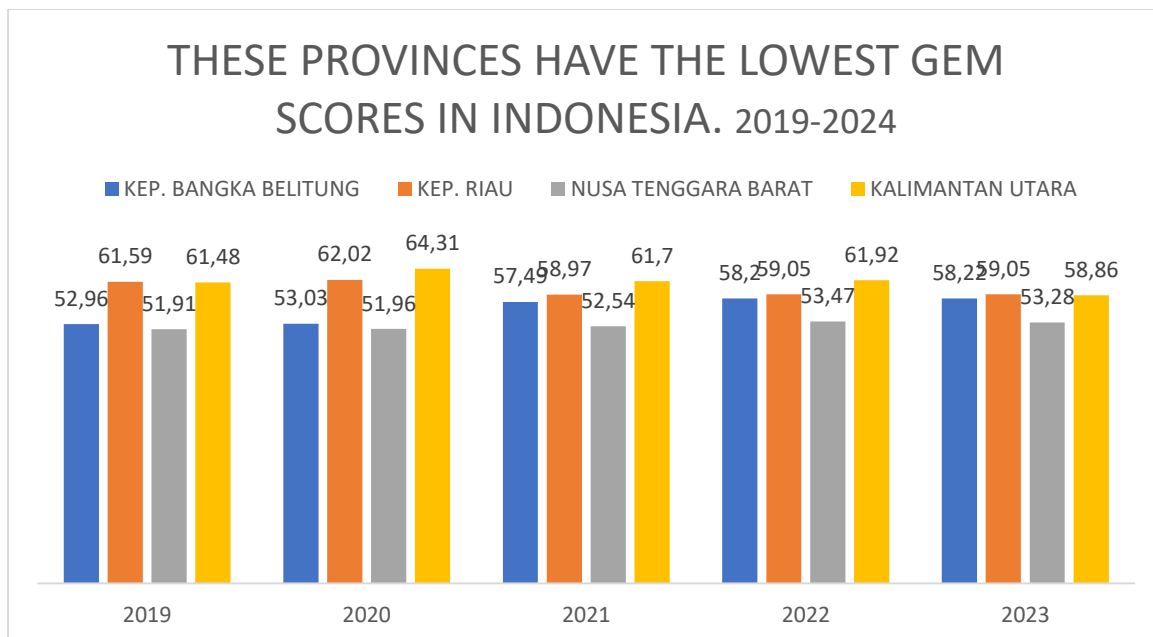
Based on the data above, North Sulawesi ranks highest with a score of 80.56 in 2023, indicating success in implementing women's empowerment policies. DI Yogyakarta and North Maluku also show consistent and significant improvements. However, some provinces, such as Central Sulawesi, still experience fluctuations in their IDG scores, indicating challenges in ensuring the sustainability of empowerment programs. Overall, the increase in IDG in these provinces demonstrates that affirmative action policies and digital transformation are beginning to have a positive impact. To maintain this trend, cross-sector collaboration and a focus on enhancing technological access, digital literacy, and women's participation in decision-making processes are essential. The performance of all provinces is presented in the following table:

Table of GEM Scores by Province in Indonesia.

Province	GEM				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Aceh	63,31	63,47	63,24	63,92	63,56
Sumatera Utara	67,76	67,52	67,79	69,33	69,18
Sumatera Barat	59,09	58,28	65,12	65,48	65,34
Riau	69,17	68,7	70,59	71,16	72,29
Jambi	65,97	65,86	65,93	67,86	68,07
Sumatera Selatan	74,45	74,64	73,88	74,89	76,58
Bengkulu	69,78	70,48	70,22	70,13	70,06
Lampung	69,23	69,06	67,96	68,24	68,16
Kep. Bangka Belitung	52,96	53,03	57,49	58,2	58,22
Kep. Riau	61,59	62,02	58,97	59,05	0
Dki Jakarta	75,14	75,16	75,42	75,3	76,31
Jawa Barat	69,48	70,24	70,62	71,22	71,74
Jawa Tengah	72,18	71,73	71,64	73,78	74,18
Di Yogyakarta	73,59	74,73	76,57	76,87	78,46
Jawa Timur	73,04	73,03	72,36	74,42	74,9
Banten	68,83	68,76	69,09	68,55	69,87
Bali	72,27	72,16	72,17	72,29	73,77
Nusa Tenggara Barat	51,91	51,96	52,54	53,47	53,28
Nusa Tenggara Timur	73,37	74,53	74,53	75,22	75,1
Kalimantan Barat	68,07	68,07	71,14	73,18	73,05
Kalimantan Selatan	74,6	74,48	74,58	74,8	75,97
Kalimantan Timur	65,65	65,54	66,64	66,89	68,96
Kalimantan Utara	61,48	64,31	61,7	61,92	58,86
Sulawesi Utara	79,1	78,98	79,07	78,99	80,56
Sulawesi Tengah	74,49	75,78	75,8	77,52	77,29
Sulawesi Selatan	76,01	76,32	74,76	76,37	75,24
Sulawesi Tenggara	71,4	72,54	73,1	73,72	73,58
Gorontalo	70,67	70,74	70,4	71,2	71,11
Sulawesi Barat	65,92	65,92	65,93	66,55	66,93
Maluku	75,77	75,54	75,54	74,99	78,09
Maluku Utara	77,5	77,28	78,59	78,99	79,05
Papua Barat	61,52	62,17	62,17	61,93	62,42
Papua	65,37	66,72	67,5	68,66	65,7
Indonesia	75,24	75,57	76,26	76,59	76,9

Source: BPS, 2024

Based on the data, there are still provinces with GEM scores below 60, namely Kepulauan Bangka Belitung, Kepulauan Riau, West Nusa Tenggara, and North Kalimantan.



Source: BPS, 2024

The low GEM scores can be attributed to the following factors: (1) limited infrastructure and technological access: Provinces such as West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and North Kalimantan face infrastructure limitations, which affect women's involvement in the digital economy; (2) Social and cultural norms: These regions are still influenced by patriarchal culture, which hinders women's participation in the economic and education sectors; (3) and Lack of digital inclusion programs: empowerment and digital literacy programs have not been implemented evenly, slowing down women's participation in the digital era (Sethuraman Geneva, 2018).

In Indonesia, affirmative action policies have provided opportunities for women to participate more actively across various sectors. However, the implementation of these policies still faces challenges, such as patriarchal culture, gaps in technological access, and weak policy monitoring. Affirmative action policies are intended to reduce gender inequality and enhance women's empowerment in sectors such as politics, economy, and education.

The affirmative action policy in the form of a 30% quota for women in parliament was implemented through Law No. 22 of 2007 (UNDANG-UNDANG REPUBLIK INDONESIA NOMOR 22 TAHUN 2007, 2007) Indonesia mandates a minimum 30% quota for women's representation on candidate lists for the legislative elections, as stipulated in the Election Law. This policy aims to enhance women's participation in political decision-making and strengthen democracy. Although the 30% representation target in the House of Representatives has not yet been achieved, the quota has encouraged greater involvement of women in national and regional politics.

Women manage around 50% of the 65 million MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) in Indonesia. The government provides access to microcredit through programs such as Kredit Usaha Rakyat (KUR) and Mekaar to support women entrepreneurs, especially in the micro and ultra-micro sectors (PERATURAN MENTERI KOORDINATOR BIDANG PEREKONOMIAN INDONESIA 15 TAHUN 2020, 2020). These programs aim to promote women's economic independence and help them transition from the informal sector to the formal sector. Additionally, in collaboration with the private sector and through the Sisternet program, the government provides digital entrepreneurship training to maximize women's participation in the digital economy. The Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) set a target for 15% representation of women in leadership positions by 2021, with plans to increase this to 25% by 2023. This initiative seeks to create inclusive work environments and promote professional women in strategic positions within BUMN.

The Women's Census in Executive Leadership Teams (ELT) analyzed the representation of women in the top 200 public companies in Indonesia (IDX200). This pioneering study collected data from 2019 to 2021 to assess the current status of women's representation in executive leadership and to explore the impact of COVID-19 on these leaders. In 2021, 15% of ELT roles in IDX200 companies were held by women, a figure unchanged since 2019. There were only 8 female CEOs in the IDX200 between 2019 and 2021. Among the 19 newly appointed CEOs in 2021, only 2 were women (IBCWE, 2021).

The government, through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA), launched the National Strategy for Women's Financial Inclusion, recognized by the Asian Development Bank as the first of its kind in the world. This strategy aims to expand women's access to financial services and help them develop businesses through financing access **and** enhanced digital literacy (Susiana, 2023).

The low GEM scores in several regions of Indonesia are caused by limited digital access, restrictive social norms, and insufficient infrastructure. To increase IDG and ensure gender equality, affirmative action policies in the digital era must focus on improving access to technology, engaging women in the STEM sector, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. Through these steps, women's empowerment can be strengthened, and their contribution to the digital economy can be maximized.

Based on the analysis above, the factors causing low can be detailed as follows. One of the biggest challenges is the limited access to information technology and the low digital literacy among women, particularly in rural and remote areas. According to reports by

UNICEF and UN Women (2023), the digital divide between men and women remains significant, with women having less internet access than men, hindering their involvement in the digital economy and online education (Sicat et al., 2023)

Strong patriarchal culture limits women's roles in the economy and political decision-making. In many areas, women still face discrimination in employment and educational opportunities, which directly impacts their low GEM. Provinces with low GEM scores, such as West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and North Kalimantan, struggle with digital infrastructure and internet connectivity, preventing women from fully utilizing technology and participating in the digital ecosystem. Moreover, women are underrepresented in STEM sectors and formal business leadership, limiting their opportunities for high-income jobs and strategic roles in the digital economy.

The affirmative action policies needed in the digital era include: (1) expanding access to the internet and digital devices, especially in remote areas. Digital literacy programs must be expanded to enable women to utilize technology for education, business, and economic participation. (2) Strengthening scholarships and educational programs for women in STEM fields to encourage greater participation in technology and the future digital economy. (3) Providing tax incentives or credit access to companies that support women's involvement in strategic positions and the technology sector. Additionally, regulations must ensure safe and discrimination-free work environments. (4) With the increased risk of gender-based violence in digital spaces, the government must introduce online protection policies, such as strict regulations against cyberbullying and digital literacy campaigns on online safety. (5) The government must collaborate with the private sector and civil society to expand women's empowerment programs. Initiatives like Sisternet by XL Axiata, which offers digital training and business support for women, can serve as models for similar programs.

4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of affirmative action policies in the digital era is crucial for accelerating the achievement of the Gender Empowerment Index (IDG) and advancing gender equality in Indonesia. These policies provide opportunities for women to participate actively in economic, political, and social sectors, primarily through improved digital access and education. However, significant challenges remain, such as limited technological access, low representation of women in STEM fields, and gender-based violence in online spaces.

Cross-sector collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society is essential to bridge these gaps and ensure that affirmative action policies effectively empower

women. Properly implemented transformation policies will enable women to contribute more significantly to digital economy development, ultimately strengthening the IDG sustainably.

Recommendations : (1) Expanding internet access and technology devices in remote areas and providing digital literacy training for women to ensure they can participate optimally in the digital economy. (2) Affirmative action policies should focus on offering scholarships and training for women in STEM fields. This step is crucial to enhance women's representation in technology and innovation sectors in the future. (3) The government should provide tax incentives or credit to companies that promote women to leadership positions, especially in technology sectors and strategic industries, to empower women further. (4) Accelerate the creation of regulations and digital literacy campaigns promoting online safety for women to enable their safe participation in digital public spaces. (5) The implementation of affirmative action policies must include continuous monitoring and evaluation to measure the impact of the policies and make necessary adjustments to ensure the program's success and sustainability.

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