

Articulation of tech companies' accountability in Global Digital Compact key to bridging digital divide

A principal outcome of the Summit of the Future, scheduled for 23–24 September 2024, is the adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC). This Compact aims to establish a global framework for the international community and stakeholders in the tech space, outlining essential commitments and actions required to foster a sustainable digital future for all. By setting international standards and norms, the [Compact lays a foundation for corporate accountability](#), urging companies to uphold, promote, and protect human rights online, integrate human rights law into emerging technologies, and mitigate risks associated with AI technologies.

The recent disclosure of the preliminary draft of the GDC by the United Nations (UN) Tech Envoy includes a critical provision under Article 29(b), that explicitly prescribes, 'We further urgently':

"Call on digital technology companies and developers, to co-develop industry accountability frameworks, in consultation with other stakeholders that, inter alia, define responsibilities and commit to standards as well as auditable public reports (SDGs 9 & 17)"

The inclusion of this provision marks a promising step towards embedding technological accountability within global governance—mobilising leaders in the digital industry to actively participate in shaping and implementing the GDC once it is ratified by member states.

Furthermore, the use of the term 'urgently' within this article underscores the imperative for including digital technology companies not just as key players in digital transformation, but also highlights the importance of their leadership as the private sector in addressing the global digital divide, ensuring that the digital realm remains open, safe, and trustworthy.

The engagement of the business community is also vital for the successful implementation of the GDC. Historically, the technology sector has been at the forefront of introducing innovation and transformative digitalisation within communities. As innovation progresses, collaboration with these 'innovators' becomes essential due to the potential risks their developments may pose, including misinformation, online safety risks, and widening the digital skills gap. Henceforth, it is crucial that the negotiating parties, namely UN member states and stakeholders, ensure the retention of such provision within the GDC through to its endorsement at the forthcoming Summit for the Future and beyond.

According to the [2023 Digital Inclusion Benchmark \(DIB\)](#), which assesses the world's 200 most influential technology companies, there remains significant potential for these entities to drive positive changes in the digital landscape given only 14% of these companies have committed to promoting digital inclusion, as evidenced by certain key performance indicators relative to the standards outlined in the GDC.



Figure 1. HQ Demographic of 200 Most Influential Tech Companies assessed by the World Benchmarking Alliance

Tech companies' human rights performance – Article 23(a)(b)

(a) Digital technology companies and developers to incorporate human rights law and principles in the development, deployment and use of digital and emerging technologies, including through the application of human rights due diligence and impact assessments, including specific to children's rights, across the technology life cycle (all Sustainable Development Goals);

(b) Digital technology companies, developers and social media platforms to commit to promote, protect and respect human rights online, be accountable for violations and abuses, and provide access to effective remedy in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and other relevant frameworks (SDGs 5, 10 & 16);

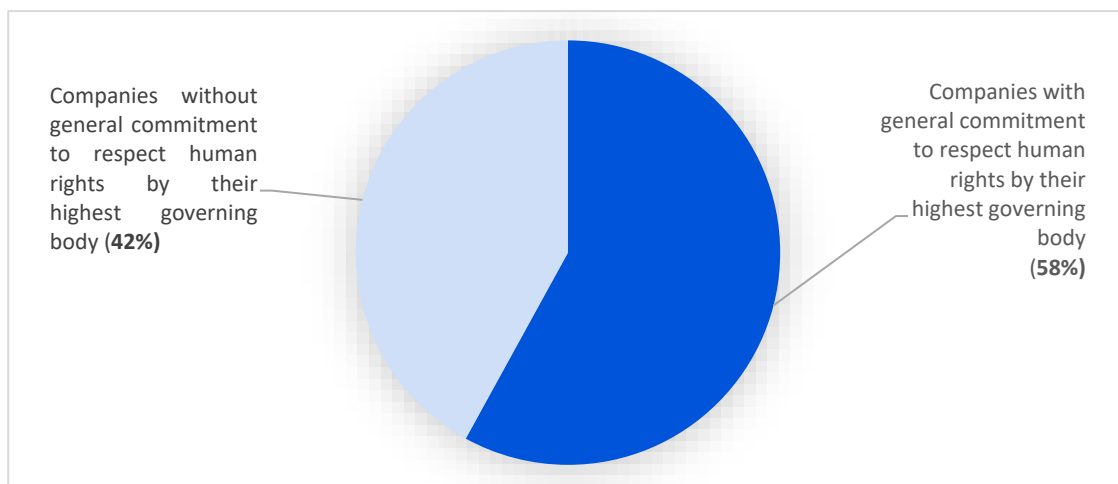


Figure 2. Percentage of digital technology companies with a general commitment to respect human rights as approved by their highest governing body.

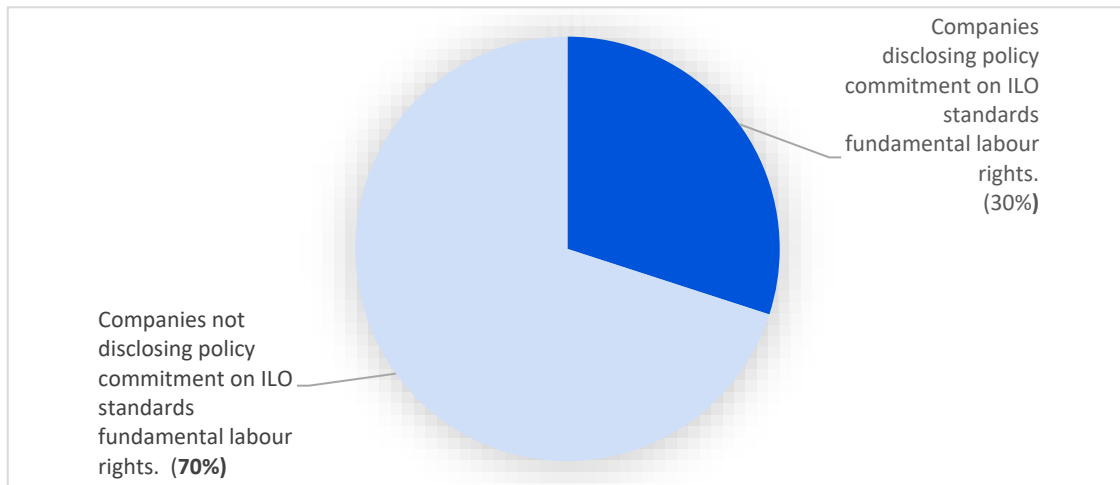


Figure 3. Percentage of digital technology companies disclosing policy statement in place that expects their business counterparts to commit to ILO standards fundamental labour rights.

While over 1 of 2 (or 58%) digital companies assessed by WBA, have disclosed a general commitment to respect human rights as approved by their highest governing body, over 2 out of 3 (or 70%) companies do not disclose any policy statement in place that expects their business counterparts commit to ILO standards fundamental labour rights.

Gender in Tech Performance – Article 7(d)

7(d) Gender equal: The full, equal, and meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls in the digital space is essential to close gender digital divides and advance sustainable development. Our cooperation will empower women and girls, mainstream gender perspectives and prioritize the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence online;

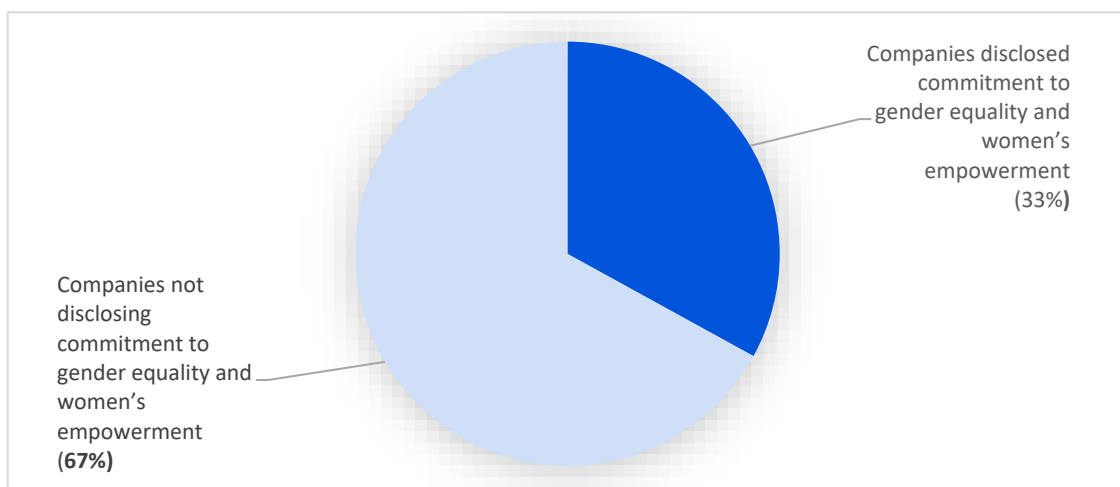


Figure 4. Percentage of digital technology companies disclosing commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment

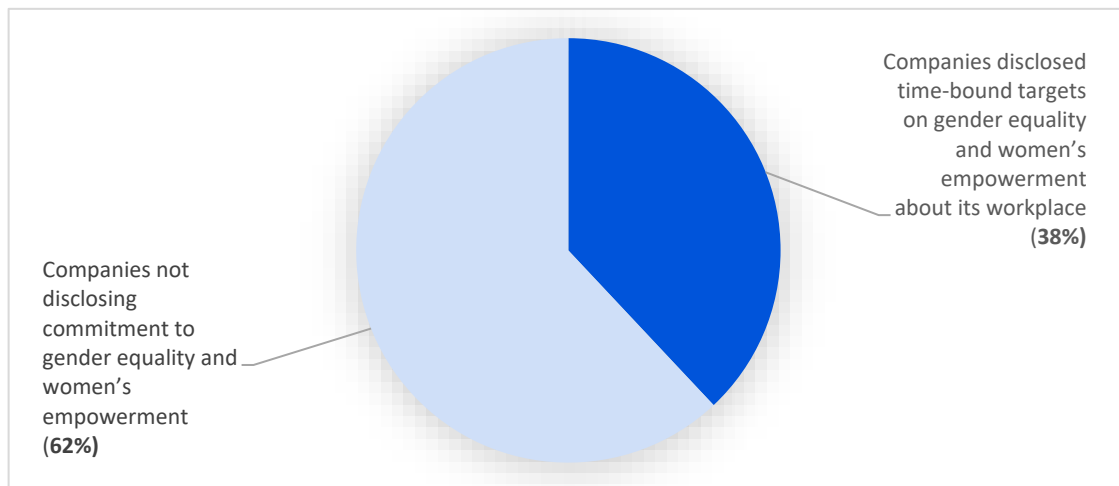


Figure 5. Percentage of digital technology companies disclosing time-bound targets on gender equality and women's empowerment about its workplace

Only 1 of 3 tech companies globally¹ have disclosed commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment and 38% of tech companies disclosed time-bound targets on gender equality and women's empowerment about its workplace.

Skills-based Training – Article 50(b)(iii)

50(b)(iii) [We therefore] build and deliver skills-based training in collaboration with technology companies and technical and academic communities;

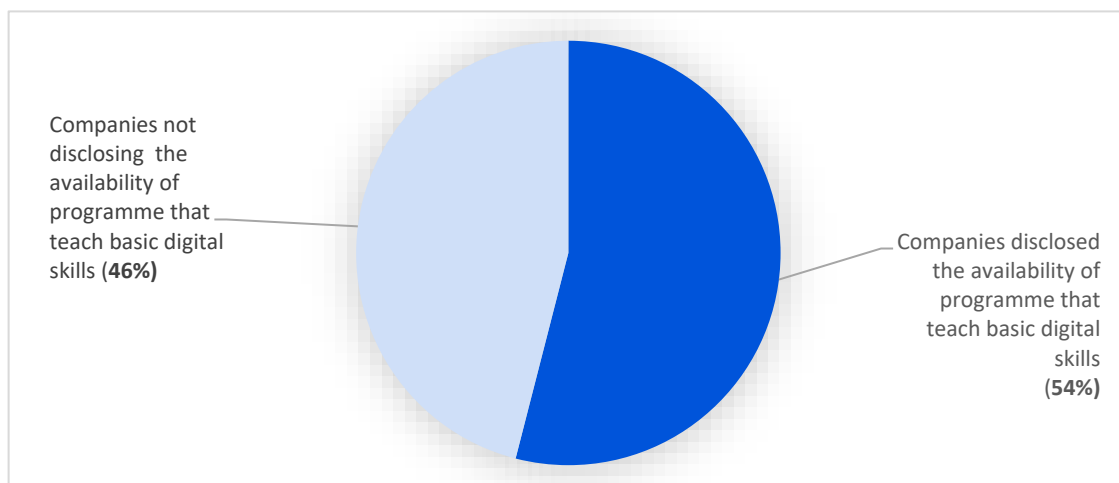


Figure 6. Percentage of digital technology companies disclosing the availability of a program that teach basic digital skills

¹ Of 194 companies assessed in the 2023 WBA Gender Assessment.

Only 54% of the digital tech companies assessed disclosed a program that teaches basic digital skills.

Trustworthy AI – Article 43(b)(iii)

(43) We recognize that the pace and power of emerging technologies are creating new opportunities but also new risks for humanity, some of which are yet unknown. We recognize international, regional, national and industry efforts underway to advance the design, development, deployment and use of safe, secure, and trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems according to their priorities and needs. We commit to adhere to the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

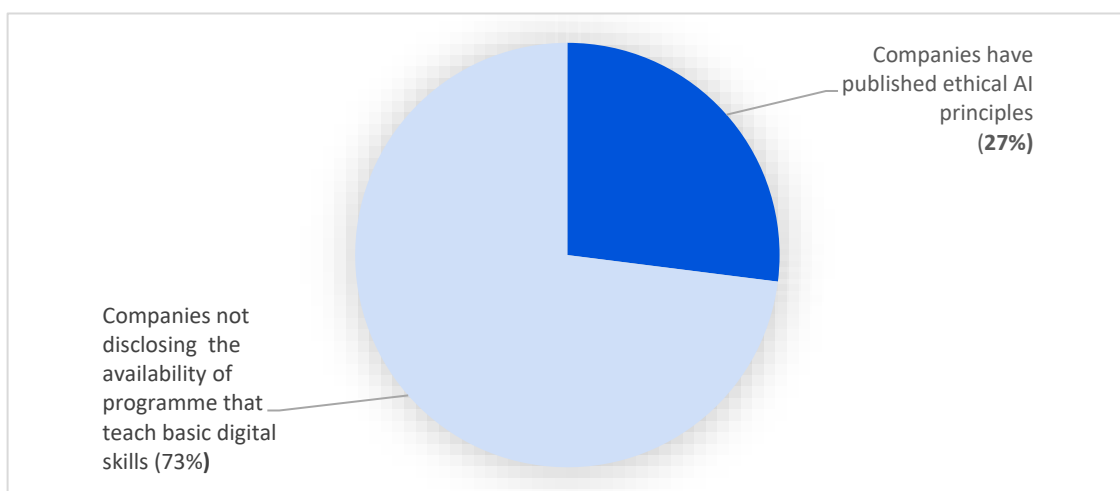


Figure 7. Percentage of digital technology companies that have published ethical AI principles

Only around 1 out of 4 tech companies assessed have published ethical AI principles.²

The inclusion of industry accountability within the GDC represents a ‘fresh-air’ forward in integrating corporate accountability into the intergovernmental system. The GDC's clear delineation of roles for digital technology companies in tech industry accountability will assist these companies in scaling up their active involvement in promoting digital inclusion globally. Through our benchmarking work, which annually assesses these companies, we have witnessed notable progress. This continuity is essential for maintaining the momentum towards a more inclusive and accountable digital transformation.

² While this is an increase from 17% in the 2021 Digital Inclusion Benchmark, majority companies still do not have Ethical AI guidelines in place disclosed.