

Secretary of State Nicky Morgan speaking at the Reform Women's Network

Good evening everyone.

I am honoured to be the first speaker at this Reform Women's Network.

Gender equality is a subject that is very close to my heart and I am not alone in this.

I was proud to serve as Minister for Equalities for two years, and throughout my time in Westminster I have been banging the drum for fairer representation across all of our industries.

And it has always been clear to me that networks like this one are crucial in driving change.

Women are stronger when we all work together for a common cause.

And although we have seen great progress in recent years, driven by inspiring women who wouldn't take no for an answer, there is still more to do.

In all parts of the world. And in all parts of our economy and society.

When I was a minister at the Treasury, I was an advocate for more women in the male-dominated banking sector.

As the first female Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, I oversaw the publication of a landmark report on Women in Finance. We followed up on this report the next year, and follow up is very important – we have got to hold people's feet to the fire.

And in the Cabinet, I drove reforms to force companies to publish their data around gender pay gaps.

My current role at DCMS presents so many opportunities to make a difference, from getting fairer representation on and off screen...

To promoting women's sport, so we can inspire our future generations of sporting heroes.

But today I want to talk about technology. I haven't had a chance to talk about my views on technology in this role yet so thank you for the opportunity.

Technology is playing an exponentially greater role in our lives, transforming the way that we live and work.

I believe that technology has huge potential. It can be used for good and for ill, to help and to hurt.

And so the challenge facing policymakers across the world is how we can shape new technologies in a way that benefits all of humankind.

Because we can only view this digital revolution as a true success if it is used to further the ideals, like freedom and equality, that we hold so dear.

We have already seen some incredible progress in this space, all across the world.

From mobile banking apps supporting female entrepreneurs in developing countries, where women are much less likely to have traditional bank accounts.

To software that improves maternity care by connecting women in hard-to-reach areas to doctors via videolink.

And apps that allow users to report street harassment, which generate alerts to assist the police and warn other women.

We need to keep this positive momentum going, and also make sure we are well equipped for the ethical issues that lie further down the line.

And so today I want to start a discussion about what we all need to do to make sure technology works for everyone and keeps advancing the cause of women.

The first way we can do this is through embedding digital skills and using the curriculum to get young girls engaged in technology early in their lives.

There is still work to do to dispel the idea that making and fixing things is for boys alone.

And this mentality can have a profound impact on the makeup of our tech sector.

The Royal Society found that only 3 per cent of girls were interested in computer science as a career, compared with 17 per cent of boys.

And last year, girls represented just 12 per cent of A level computer science entries.

There is a fundamental risk here.

A recent paper by Reform identified digital skills as one of the key barriers to digital inclusion.

And so we need to get girls coding and problem solving from an early age, and demonstrate that there are meaningful career and educational pathways for them in later life.

That is why the Government is investing 84 million pounds of new funding over the next four years to deliver a comprehensive programme to support the teaching of computing in schools.

This includes a pilot of targeted activities to improve the gender balance of students taking GCSE and A level computer science.

And at university level, we recently announced 2,500 new places on AI and data conversion courses starting next year.

This includes up to 1,000 government-funded scholarships for students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds.

This is important work and I will be taking a close interest in how it develops.

Because a strong tech-based curriculum, open to all, is vital if we are to remain competitive as a nation in the decades ahead.

But this quest for fair representation doesn't only apply in the classroom, it applies to the boardroom too.

And we are also seeing some female tech entrepreneurs who have been blazing a trail and inspiring us all.

Baroness Lane-Fox, one of this country's greatest living tech pioneers, was one of the brains behind the ground-breaking gov.uk website, which I was quizzed on by the Select Committee today, and is a concept that has been imitated all across the world.

But when you take a step back and look at the numbers, it is clear that more needs to be done.

A Tech Nation report showed that while women make up 49 per cent of the workforce, they make up only 19 per cent of tech roles.

And when looking at leadership positions, only 23 per cent of directors in the tech sector are women.

Female tech leaders are a great investment for any company.

What right minded company would knowingly cast aside people who represent and understand half their customer base?

When I chaired the Treasury Select Committee, I saw how greater gender diversity within banks led to better financial performance, less groupthink, which is really important, and more open discussions.

And one of the drivers of this change was the Women in Finance Charter, an initiative that I was proud to support.

And at DCMS, we have worked with industry on the Tech Talent Charter, an initiative designed to promote diversity in the tech workforce.

Signatories pledge to implement recruitment and retention practices that will address the gender imbalance in so many tech roles.

We recently doubled our funding for this Charter, bringing it up to over

350,000 pounds to date.

Over 400 companies, from international tech giants right through to start-ups and charities, have already signed, and I am calling on more companies to do so.

If you know any who haven't signed yet you could say you expect them to do so!

The tech sector, more than any other sector, has the potential to make a difference here.

Data is the lifeblood of our digital economy, as I've learnt in this job. And tech firms are experts at gathering, processing and analysing it.

And I want to see tech firms demonstrating this rigour and focus when it comes to their hiring and recruitment.

I want to see them collecting and considering their data so they truly understand the makeup of their organisation, and what change might be needed.

I have seen from my time in Parliament how women in leadership positions can change the culture of an organisation.

In recent years, we have seen proxy voting for MPs on maternity leave, more sensible working hours and improved facilities for working mothers.

Yes, there has been a bar in Parliament since 1773 but childcare facilities were only installed about a decade ago...

A few simple and practical changes have now made Parliament a much more welcoming place, and women were instrumental in driving these changes. And it was a real cross-party effort. We might have a female speaker soon.

Just as we need to keep encouraging more women to come into Parliament, I'd challenge all firms to think about what they can do to make their organisation a more open and inclusive place to work.

And one way we can do this is getting women in the rooms where decisions are made, just as they are here at Reform, one of the few think-tanks with a female Director. That's fantastic.

Not only is diversity and inclusion the right thing to do, it is fundamental to the success and ethical development of emerging technologies.

There are some critical decisions being made every day about the building blocks of new technologies like AI. .

And if women are not at the table when these discussions are taking place then there is a risk that gender inequality gets embedded.

And it is no exaggeration to say that this can be life threatening.

Caroline Criado-Perez has written an excellent book, Invisible Women, about

gender bias, especially in technology, and how it can make life harder for women.

Some of it is mildly annoying, like smart phones being designed according to men's hands, rather than women's hands.

But in extreme cases it could lead to physical harm, like how for decades crash test dummies represented men's bodies, meaning women were more likely to be injured in a car crash.

And as technology takes on a greater role in our everyday lives, there is a risk that women can become sidelined, not through malice but subconscious bias.

Whether it's voice recognition designed for male voices so women literally can't be heard...

Or algorithms designed to sift job applications that can unintentionally hire more men into male-dominated jobs. Or as we heard on the Treasury Select Committee, banking algorithms might unintentionally be making more favourable credit decisions towards men than women. Not because of the strength of the application, but because of in-built bias.

These are valid concerns and we are working as a department to shine a light on them.

As a Government we have recently established the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, to provide independent recommendations on these important issues.

This is a world-leading advisory body designed to make sure data and AI delivers the best possible outcomes for society, in support of their innovative and ethical use.

I was in Estonia recently, one of the most digital friendly nations in the world. Other countries are very interested to learn about the work that the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation and Office for AI are doing in the UK.

They are embarking on many exciting projects, including one on bias in the use of algorithms, and I know that gender bias will be an important element in their considerations.

And we need to think seriously about our online spaces too.

Unfortunately, being a woman in the digital age can mean relentless harassment and abuse, especially if you are in public life.

A study by Amnesty shows that an abusive tweet is sent to a woman on Twitter every 30 seconds, and that these tweets are often sexist, misogynistic and violent.

I have received countless abusive messages on social media, including death threats.

Many of my Parliamentary colleagues have also experienced horrific online abuse, and some of them have given up on social media.

If we allow women to be driven out of online spaces by trolls and keyboard warriors, then our public discourse will be poorer as a result.

We wouldn't allow this to happen to our public spaces offline and so why do we allow it to happen online . We can't stand by.

That is why the Government is a world leader in our approach to online harms and why we are legislating to give users better protection.

We will create a new statutory duty of care, establishing in law that online companies have a responsibility for the safety of their users.

Compliance will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator with meaningful sanctions at its disposal.

It will have the power to demand transparency from online companies about the harms found on their platforms and what they are doing about them.

But this will be a regulatory approach designed to encourage good behaviour as well as to punish the bad.

And so the regulator will have broader responsibilities to uphold freedom of expression online and encourage the development of technology that promotes safety online.

The UK has a world-leading role and what we do is being watched by other countries around the world. Our challenge as a society is to help shape an Internet that is open and vibrant but protects its users from harm.

This is vital if we are to rebuild public confidence and set clear expectations for companies, especially as more and more of our public discourse moves online.

Women have a vital role to play in this debate about the future of the Internet, and indeed all the technologies that will continue to transform our lives.

We need more women at the top table, so these important technologies will take into account the needs of women, and will not entrench the gender inequalities that exist in our society.

One of the best ways we can do this is through strong women coming together to make things happen.

And networks like this one are so important, in forging connections and sparking conversations that will help women everywhere, whichever industry they work in.

I am optimistic about the power of technology and the change it can deliver. We have to be optimistic. The genie is out of the bottle. We need to harness

that and respond in the right way.

But technology will only be as positive, and as ethical, as the people who are driving it. And that is where people round this table come in.

Please keep innovating, asking difficult questions, making your voices heard and talking to government.

The success of the digital revolution depends on it. Thank you very much.