**Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to Protect Women and Girls: The Lahaa Approach**

**SLIDE 1**

Thank you, Denise. Welcome everyone. I am here to share with you some dire statistics, but also share our incredible opportunity with the Laaha platform. Let’s start with a bit of background information.

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We all know the human brain is incredibly complex. It operates both consciously and unconsciously, shaping the way we perceive the world. Sometimes, those perceptions take the form of explicit bias—for example, when someone refuses to hire a woman simply because she is a woman. We can recognize that as intentional and ethically wrong.

But our brains also make implicit associations—unconscious or inherent biases that influence us without our awareness. These associations are not deliberate, but they are very real. Common examples include affinity bias, where you favor people similar to you; confirmation bias, which makes you seek out information that confirms your existing beliefs; gender bias leading to assumptions about roles based on sex; and name bias, which favors certain names over others on resumes. These biases can appear in hiring, leadership, and everyday interactions, influencing decisions about candidates, employees, and even simple social situations, and when these human biases are carried into the data that trains artificial intelligence, they shape the way AI behaves.

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Generative AI is powerful. It can write, design, create, and even make recommendations that affect lives. But just like people, AI can absorb and reproduce biases.

Women constitute only around 22% of AI professionals globally. This means that for every one woman, there are approximately 3.5 men in the field. Accordingly, bias in AI is not just a technical problem—it is a societal challenge. Because AI is increasingly being used in areas like healthcare, financial services, hiring, policing, and even armed conflicts, if it goes unchecked, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities at a much larger scale.

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Bias can enter an AI system at multiple stages.

* Data collection: If the data used to train an AI platform is not diverse or representative, the results will mirror that imbalance. Imagine training a hiring tool with past company records. If historically the company favored men, the AI will likely recommend more men for future positions. Further, if most examples show men as scientists and women as nurses, AI may interpret that men and women are better suited for certain roles and make biased decisions when filtering an application.
* Data labeling is the next stage where bias may occur. Human annotators may label the same data differently depending on cultural norms or personal assumptions. This can introduce subtle but powerful bias.
* Model training: If training data is imbalanced or the model architecture is not designed to account for diverse inputs, the algorithms can overfit to majority groups, producing less accurate outcomes for minority groups.
* Deployment: Even when models look fair in testing, they may show bias in the real world if not monitored with diverse inputs.

This is why addressing bias isn’t a one-time fix—it requires continuous evaluation, feedback, and correction.

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So why should we, as Zontians, be especially concerned?

Because bias in AI doesn’t just create bad data—it has been shown to exacerbate gender-based violence.

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (“CEDAW”) has called digitized violence the “newest category of gender-based violence.” As AI accelerates, the nature of gender-based violence evolves. As our world becomes increasingly digital, so too do the spaces and means for perpetrating  [gender-based violence](https://www.unfpa.org/gender-based-violence).

We are witnessing a rise in the weaponizing of technology and online platforms to attack women and girls on the basis of their gender. This violence infiltrates homes and bedrooms, workspaces and schools. It has no limits or geographical boundaries. It can even start online and escalate to physical spaces, or vice-versa, creating a dangerous continuum of online-offline abuse that can end in the most extreme forms of violence, including femicide.

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The statistics speak for themselves:

* A 2020 *Plan International* study across 31 countries found that 58% of girls and young women had experienced some form of online abuse.
* By 2024, research from *Plan International* and CNN showed that nearly 40% of young women aged 13–24 were harassed online at least once a month. One in ten (11%) said it happened daily. In this study, 78% of the young women had experienced some form of harmful online incident.

That is not just data—that is millions of girls and women silenced, harmed, and excluded.

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And it is worse for indigenous and other women of color. In a statement relating to women journalists, UNESCO reported that a staggering 86 percent of Indigenous women journalists reported experiencing online violence. The storm of technology-facilitated, gender-based violence spikes during conflict and for women journalists reporting from conflict areas.

This online violence has been experienced by women journalists of all color around the world. It is designed to belittle, humiliate, and shame; induce fear, silence, and retreat; discredit the journalists professionally, undermining accountability journalism and trust in facts; and chill their active participation (along with that of their sources, colleagues and audiences) in public debate. The result – women’s voices are lost.

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Let me give you some examples of how the AI violence fuels and expands gender-based violence:

* Deepfakes & image-based abuse: One of the most troubling developments is the use of generative AI in perpetuating image-based abuse. In 2023, 98% of non-consensual deepfake content was sexual in nature, and 99% of those affected were women. Generative AI has made it easier to create and distribute non-consensual, explicit content, victimizing more women and potentially desensitizing others to digital violence.
* Amplification of misogynistic content: Algorithms designed to maximize clicks and views often end up promoting harmful, sexist material. Misogyny spreads faster—and further.
* New avenues for stalking and surveillance: AI-powered tracking tools have been weaponized to monitor women both online and offline.
* Biased risk assessments: AI used in criminal justice or social services can unfairly predict risks, failing to protect survivors and even endangering them.
* Reinforcement of stereotypes: Many language and image models portray men as scientists, doctors, and CEOs and women as teachers, nurses, and waitstaff, feeding harmful stereotypes into workplaces and classrooms.

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The harm of biased AI extends beyond direct harassment and violence:

* Economic insecurity: Recruiting algorithms have a bias against female candidates, screening out women in certain fields, while automation threatens job sectors where women are overrepresented.
* Healthcare discrimination: AI trained on male data can misdiagnose women, especially in conditions like heart disease, not to mention reproductive issues.
* Mistrust in technology: Women facing repeated online harm withdraw from digital spaces, losing opportunities for self-expression and leadership.
* Privacy threats: Breaches of sensitive data—like reproductive health data—can have devastating legal consequences in jurisdictions where abortion or other procedures are criminalized.

This is not just about technology. This is about women’s safety, livelihoods, and voices.

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But there’s another side to this story. AI can be harnessed. It can be used to combat gender-based violence.

* Survivor support chatbots can offer confidential, judgment-free spaces for women to seek help and information.
* Abuse detection tools can identify and remove harassment or non-consensual images online.
* Policy data analysis can uncover hidden trends in gender-based violence, helping governments and organizations craft better prevention strategies.
* Enhanced reporting systems powered by AI can simplify the reporting process, preserve anonymity, and connect survivors to resources.

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We are already seeing promising examples:

* bSafe, a mobile app, provides safety alerts for women.
* Botler.ai, based in Canada, helps survivors determine if what they experienced violates criminal law.
* Chatbots like Sophia and rAInbow provide confidential legal and emotional support.
* And then there’s Laaha—a groundbreaking platform, the first ever digital safe space created by and for women and girls. With support from UNICEF and Zonta International, it delivers essential information on health, safety, and gender-based violence directly to women and girls, in engaging and accessible ways, allowing them to learn, thrive, and rise.

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Zonta became involved in the program by vote at the Brisbane convention, where we learned that “Laha” is an Arabic word meaning “for her” or “belongs to her”. UNICEF made it a brand by adding an a so that it is “Laaha”.

The platform can be accessed anywhere from around the world and is actively supported in 11 countries and in 13 languages. <https://www.laaha.org/en/home>. The platform allows us to extend the impact and reach of Zonta’s more than 50-year partnership with UN agencies as never before. This is particularly important now that many in-person essential services for women and girls have been shuttered and closed.

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Use of the platform has increased significantly since it was launched. Over the past 2 years, the Laaha platform has reached 1.5 million girls with life saving information about safety, health, and their bodies. If a young girl can’t read, she can listen to content that is recorded by local speakers. Currently, UNICEF is building out the interactive model to include voice responses by phone.

Do you want to see how it works and how even young women in our District can access valuable information?

<https://youtu.be/zGM9HKxLsHs>

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Now, let’s go to the site.

<https://www.laaha.org/en/home>

As shown in the video and like many DV sites, the platform has several safe exit buttons. This protects anyone viewing the information.

Do you all agree that this is an exciting approach to advocacy and education?

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What can we do going forward?

First, ethical development: AI must be built on diverse, representative datasets, with development teams that reflect the diversity of the people affected.

Second, human-centered design: Survivors’ experiences should guide the design of tools, with strong protections for privacy and safety. Their voices must become part of the AI databases.

Third, robust regulation and policy: Governments and companies must be held accountable for harmful AI systems.

Fourth, ongoing oversight: AI cannot be left to run unchecked. Even unbiased data can produce biased outcomes, so regular monitoring is essential.

Fifth, and most important: We must continue to support safe digital places for women and girls. We must continue to partner with agencies like UNICEF and UNFPA that can ensure access around the world in many languages and also partner with local agencies and organizations in our communities to let them know Laaha exists and educate them about its capabilities. I see a day when the programmers that are working to preserve tribal and other disappearing languages partner with UNICEF to add more robust information to the Laaha platform. This cannot be done without our support. You, the members, are what make Zonta programs work.

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**What thoughts should we take home?**  Artificial intelligence is transforming our world faster than most of us can keep up. But if we don’t address bias, it will reinforce the inequalities we are fighting to dismantle. Gender-based violence will be exacerbated.

As Zontians, we know what is at stake. Bias in AI is not only about flawed systems—it is about justice, equality, and the safety of women and girls worldwide.

Because of our partnership in the Laaha platform, we have this incredible opportunity to help shape the future of AI into something that uplifts rather than harms, that empowers rather than silences, and that brings us closer to a truly equitable world. Spread the word about Laaha. Let young girls and parents know there is a safe digital platform for them.

*Thank you.*