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Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Digital technologies: instrument to increase mother's capacities and to reduce gaps

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) oversees a network of more than 40 grassroots organizations, working in some 30 countries around the world, to support and empower mothers and their families and to advance the human rights of women and children. On the 59th Session of the UN Commission on Social Development, MMM would like to draw attention to the role of digital technology in mothers' lives. If technology helps to improve people's quality of life, it can also create inequalities. The challenge is that digital technology should be a lever to improving the social development of communities and the realization of SDGs for all.

Digital technology has transformed societies and economies. Technological advances in health, artificial intelligence, finance, and social media opened new ways to communicate, created new changes and opened new types of employment. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have helped to improve the quality of life for families in remote areas. Mobile technology reduces costly landlines and gives automatic access to health, education and financial services, which help increase inclusiveness. Digital infrastructure provides energy-saving solutions and improved wellbeing for many women, such as the innovations to help mothers and children obtain clean water in safe conditions. Another example is the practice of medicine and health supported by mobile devices known as mHealth, such as "Mamans Mobiles contre le Malaria au Mali (MAMMA)" which helped reduce malaria mortality in Africa. This app collects data and communicates with health centers to monitor and treat families. Also, in India, digital technologies help to fight against maternal mortality and malnutrition, the Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERPT) has created one mobile device to increase communication between village-level and community workers. Additionally, digital technologies help provide access to financial services, many women can have access to their own money beyond gender burden. In another sector, ICT has helped support humanitarian action, they help coordinate better the actions in emergency situations, e.g. Digital cash in Somalia helps refugees to have access to buy the food and water. Digital technology also improves access, data collection, and monitoring to help in the realization of SDG Goals.

Unfortunately, many of those benefits remain in developing countries or in small sectors of the populations… ITC also opens the way to new inequalities or increases existing inequalities. "While technology brings productivity gains, for instance, it can also erect hurdles for individuals and societies. For all its promise, technological innovation is already creating winners and losers" (UN World Social Report 2020). In most of the cases, access to technology is linked to pre-existed infrastructures, such as electricity. Even though the electrification cost has been accelerating last years, UN estimated 850 million people without this service. The contrast is bigger between urban and rural areas; rural areas were home to 45 per cent of the world's population in 2018 (UN Habitat). Even though many people live in cities and have access to electricity, access to technology is not guaranteed, by lack of affordable internet networks, mobile phones and laptops, thus fueling inequalities. Disparities of education, income and gender also increase this disparity. Technological divide is a real issue, as UN General Secretary quotes "It is threatening to become the new face of inequality, reinforcing the social and economic disadvantages suffered by women and girls, people with disabilities and minorities of all kinds".

Technological divide underpins the gap of access to ICT, especially for women who often are more impacted by social, economic, and cultural burdens, together with

gender digital divide. Access to ICT is very much elated to gender barriers. In 2020 4.1 billion people have access to technology. However only 48% of women use internet. Furthermore, in 2020 UN statistics show that 130 million girls worldwide are not in school, 9.5 million girls globally are excluded to secondary school (Drive for 5). In many countries in the global south, boys' education is prioritized over girls. Other barriers such as economic issues, marriage and social norms also hold girls, women and mothers back. Countless girls around the world help their mothers at home rather than go to school. As the Secretary-General pointed out "social and institutional barriers still discourage girls from taking up careers based on science, technology, engineering and mathematics." So much still needs to be done to improve digital technology and to leave no woman or girl behind.

We here wish to spotlight that to attain a sustainable development in technologies, it must be encompassed in a much broader cross-cutting vision based on a threefold perspective including technological innovation, environmental issues and human issues: ethos, education and development. We have in mind an MMM member in Bangladesh, Friendship, an NGO, operating in remote areas to support marginalized populations. Their response in the pandemic doubled with extreme climatic conditions is exemplary and illustrates that inclusiveness of many issues and stakeholders is key to obtain tangible results.

For many years, they have partnered with an important French electricity firm to install solar lighting systems in these regions and enable families and schools to access to ICT – and education. When the pandemic arrived, combined with floods and the Cyclon Amphan, they switched on ITC to full regime using state channels for broadcast where internet was still available, the government education portal and an intensive flow of personalized contacts between the teachers and students and families to make sure no one was left behind. Fueling remote schooling is paramount: 108 248 phone calls and more than 202 000 home visits helped to maintain the level of education.

Fostering a social network infused with solidarity, honesty and generosity is one other element. All the Friendship programs are infused with the transmission of these values. Therefore, students were better prepared to face the 2020 crisis, participating in a foodbank initiative for instance and contributing towards an overall wellbeing of their own community. At the outcome of the crisis, these young people who benefit from Friendship's educational support will have progressed academically but also will have been enriched as human beings and citizens capable of commitment for their communities.

Targeting youth with ITC, both boys and girls is vital because they are the citizens of tomorrow. Let us not forget the important role of mothers who nurture and care, whose educational role is vital in early childhood and who must not be left on the side of the road either. In both developed and developing countries, women also assume the majority of unpaid domestic and care work, often juggling paid work and family responsibilities, to the detriment of their personal aspirations, their economic independence, and even their health. The 2019 evaluation of SDG 5, Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, showed that in 90 countries for which data is available, women devote on average three times more hours a day to unpaid care and domestic work than men, which limits the time available for paid work, education and leisure. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated this situation. In families with children, mothers, much more than fathers, have seen the time they devote to childcare increase during the lockdown. Millions of families struggle with the use of technology and many of families do not have access to technology to continue the education of children. Big cities like New York are the example of this situation, the situation is catastrophic for almost 114,000 homeless students who living in shelters or in overcrowded apartments and are unable to have access to devices or the internet

to do online learning. Many countries, like Mexico and Somalia, tried to close the gaps with the use of radio and television, however many people in rural areas have limit access to infrastructures.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of digital technology and caused a rise of the use of health systems, technologies, telecommuting and remote learning. On the other hand, the Coronavirus crisis is having a cruel worldwide loop effect on digital technologies inequalities.

In this particular context MMM calls on governments and stakeholders to:

• Take action: Covid-19 and its economic devastation offers a unique opportunity to promote digital technology for well-being, to utilize them in the promotion of education of girls as a capital investment for development.

• Ensure remote learning for all. Promote the creation of policies of affordable internet for all. Help children to continue their formal education even though the pandemic. Education and care which must not be considered as expenses but high return investments.

• Connect technology for mothers around the world. Expand access to Mobile Health (mHealth) to expand access to reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child Health (RMNCH). Like the Early Childhood Peace Consortium pointed out, Mobile health (mHealth) innovations support health service functions such as health promotion, emergency medical response, data collection, point-of-care diagnostics, and clinical guidance.

• Support parents in their caring responsibilities thanks to digital technologies.

• Implement policies to reduce technological divide and address the objectives of the Agenda 2030 in a cross-cutting inclusive approach encompassing innovation, environmental issues and human issues for sustainable social development.

• Provide quality education for all. The importance of education underpins all human achievements, including care work. Education policies correlate with care policies with positive outcomes in society and countries as a whole.

The pandemic starkly challenges the choices that societies will have to make to build a future and how this can be achieved. UN Secretary General pointed "we are at a turning point. We urgently need to harness the infinite opportunities offered by digital technology in order to scale up our efforts on health care, on the climate crisis, on eradicating poverty and across all the Sustainable Development Goals." Digital technologies to reduce gaps and create effectiveness, must be harnessed to the goal of providing inclusive better education systems encompassing the well-being of families and mothers particularly who are at front as well. For the well-being and development of society, the technological divide must be reduced to improve education and motherhood.

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