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peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Global G.L.O.W., and Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Loreto Generalate, non-governmental organizations 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate is present in 40 countries, collaborating with communities and educating over 400,000 women and girls to become global citizens and claim their human rights, including the rights to equality, education and an inclusive society for all. Global G.L.O.W. works in 26 countries with local organizations to support girls to confidently pursue lives of their own design through mentor-led programs focused on girls' self-advocacy, health and well-being, educational engagement, economic opportunity, and community impact. We welcome the focus of the 67th UN Commission on the Status of Women on the role of digital innovation in the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Technology and its innovations are utilized in myriad ways to both positive and negative effect. It is used for efficient and wide-reaching dissemination of knowledge in forms of distance learning and online education and can help foster inclusive learning environments. It provides inclusive spaces for people to share experiences and concerns and enable people to form connections and social circles which might not be possible otherwise. However, technology is also used for harmful and criminal activities such as digital gender-based violence, harassment, cyberbullying, and cybercrimes.

Technology provides opportunities for girls and women to reach their full potential and become change agents for themselves and their communities. An online survey of our network conveyed how they used the power of social media to have a voice, raise global awareness, mobilize action, and make governments accountable for addressing women's and girls' rights. The 2022 report of the UN Human Rights Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls titled Girls' and Young women's Activism states, "they increasingly use online spaces, social media platforms to organize, mobilize, network, campaign and advocate." Young female activists are opening spaces to engage in public discourse when they find themselves excluded from formal decision-making processes.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused extreme disruption worldwide and forced us to embrace technology in our day-to-day lives like never before. Schools and businesses closed indefinitely as national lockdowns were enforced. Due to challenging economic circumstances during the pandemic, girls' education was further deprioritized, many did not return to school and instead were made to contribute to household economies through unpaid care work and informal labour.

Most schools turned to digital learning to continue some level of regular teaching schedule during the lockdown periods. While online education helped to mitigate the pandemic restrictions and reduce the level of disruption to education, the gaps, and inequalities in children's, especially girls' access to the necessary technology further left those who were already struggling economically behind.

The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) 2020 Affordability Report found that although the cost of the internet has reduced, the high cost of basic connectivity means that over a billion people remain without internet, particularly in low-income countries. All of us can benefit from digital innovations but without access to technological resources, education and knowledge, the majority will be left behind. The 2021 World Wide Web Foundation Cost of Exclusion Report also show that the digital gender gap costs the global economy billions of dollars. Excluding women and girls does not make economic sense.

Our network in India reported that over 98% of the girls were able to access some form of digital learning during the pandemic. This, however, was not the case

in Uganda, Kenya and South Africa, with some girls noting they had no access to devices, internet, or electricity. They also raised the issue of the male members of the household being given priority to use the family's digital resources. For those who had access, many were aware of their privileged position while many girls in rural communities did not have the same online access to educational opportunities.

The Tony Blair Institute's 2021 report noted that globally two thirds of school-age children lack internet connection at home and if available, girls are often the last to benefit due to gender biases and stereotypes. The report concluded that with barriers to technology removed, girls are likely to respond to digital education with a high level of engagement. Furthermore, access to technology is more empowering for girls and women than for boys and men. These advantages extend beyond the realm of formal education and empower them in other areas of life.

Our survey showed that for many girls, online learning was a great success, with some initially struggling to adapt and concentrate due to increased distractions in the home environment. Their teachers, however, found it hard to manage delivering online education in an engaging and effective way at the beginning, without the necessary technological literacy.

These responses complement the findings of the 2022 Transforming Education Summit Digital Learning and Transformation paper on the pressing issues that prevent access to digital education opportunities. Their recommendations to ensure that all, especially girls and women, have access to the educational and economic opportunities provided by a digital revolution is worth noting. What is required to achieve this is highlighted in the Summit's vision of the universal provision of access to broadband connectivity, increased digital literacy and development for online educators and the development of a free, public digital learning platform.

Working with girl advocates from a diverse range of backgrounds and geographical locations also revealed that infrastructural inequalities hinder participation in important global conversations and opportunities to share their experiences. Our network disclosed that online platforms have allowed them to highlight difficult women's and girls' issues that were not previously discussed and enhanced conversations around topics not covered by mainstream media. They were able to form intergenerational connections and network to better understand the issues and develop solutions together.

In rural and poorer communities, issues such as electricity disruptions and unreliable internet connectivity mean that even when these girls can access a device, their ability to participate in live webinars and meetings is limited. These obstacles also complicate their online class attendance and limit their social, political, and economic participation. As our girl activists often say, the girls most affected by these issues are unable to be present at the table.

Unfortunately, lack of access is not the only predicament girls and women face in relation to digital technology. Around 17% of those who responded to our survey shared that they or someone they knew had encountered cyberbullying regarding their appearance, sexual harassment, unsolicited and sexually explicit or abusive messages from strangers. Some reported increased incidences of cybercrimes like financial fraud, fake online shopping sites and harassment by scammers. Others admitted to restricting their use of social media to avoid unsolicited messages and believe that misogynistic comments discourage women and girls from speaking out online about issues that affect them. If we are to harness the power of digital technology to achieve gender equality, governments and social media corporations need to take appropriate measures, including enacting and enforcing laws, to ensure safe online access for all. The responsibility for monitoring cyberbullying, cybercrimes and other dangers should not be left to girls and women.

That women and girls face barriers to accessing digital technology is not a surprise. Despite numerous reports and global commitments, over thirty years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and ten years the declaration of International Day of the Girl, gender inequality persists. Universal access to the internet and digital technology is a public good and a right for all.

We know the issues and the solutions, what is lacking is the political will. We again call on Member States to deliver on what they committed to decades ago. Girls and women are asking for their rights NOW, not in the future.

Together with the women and girls in our network, we call on UN member states to:

- Deliver on their commitments to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 especially universal quality education and gender equality.
- Strategically invest in quality education, digital literacy, and training for all, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, and indigenous people to eliminate the digital divide. And include, support, and listen to girls' needs in closing the digital divide.
- Invest in digital and electricity infrastructures, national broadband and mobile technology that allows affordable, stable, and safe access to digital connectivity for all.
- Work with social media platform corporations to take appropriate measures to ensure online safety for all including enacting and enforcing laws against cyberbullying and cybercrimes.

Endorsement:

1. VIVAT International.
