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peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, 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

Over the past forty years, information and communication technologies have transformed the way we work, the nature of learning and education, and the methods by which we achieve personal and collective goals. Parents, mothers, grandparents, children, and the range of loved ones who form part of the modern family today face new and challenging choices about technology use, access, and control. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how much we can depend on the use of technologies and how they can affect our lives. This increasing reliance on digital technologies has created intense pressures and opportunities for families. Online access, for example, presents new threats to women and their families around making them more vulnerable to abuse. At the same time, technologies are providing important connections, as women and their families scattered across the globe stay connected and engage in "remote caregiving."

Researchers, policymakers, popular pundits, and journalists often note that digital technologies have the power to disrupt personal relationships and deliver uninvited content. This anxiety centers on the impact that new technologies can have on the well-being of women and their children and the strength and social cohesion of families. The "anytime anywhere" access of Internet-enabled technologies has produced a thicket of benefits and dangers that families struggle to navigate. There are also great disparities in how families use technology, whether merely for entertainment, or for social and educational betterment. Today, families have no choice but to use digital communication to interact with the many public institutions that no longer accept paper applications or other communications. Public assistance programs have increasingly become "smart," meaning participants are now more likely to interact with an algorithmically trained virtual assistant rather than a human caseworker. Mothers, fathers and caregivers must also contend with digital systems in schools and elsewhere, as learning processes become computer-driven.

Consequently, the impact of New Technologies has been featured as one of the megatrends suggested by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs for the preparations and celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2024. The International Federation for Family Development has organized a focus group to understand better all the different aspects of this topic, in order to produce recommendations that can be validated by experts and confirmed by the families we are in contact with along the world and other global non-governmental organizations, as part of the proposals for the Anniversary, especially of those who will be included in the Civil Society Declaration we are promoting on the occasion of that anniversary.

To this end, we gathered a group of experts who are active in a variety of fields related to families and new technologies, so that their opinions could derive the central elements to our advocacy work on this topic: Matt Brossard, Chief, Research on Education and Development Unit UNICEF, Office of Research Innocenti, Florence, Italy. Tracey C. Burns, Senior Analyst, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Directorate for Education and Skills, Paris, France. Amina Fazlullah, Equity Policy Counsel, Common Sense Media, Washington DC, USA. Tom Harrison, Reader and Programme Director at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, Director of Education at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Jessica Navarro, Research Assistant, Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina Greensboro. Luci Pfeiffer, Pediatrician, Doctor in Child and Adolescent Health, Psychoanalyst, Member of the Brazilian Society of Pathology Working Group on Health in the Digital Age, Coordinator of DEDICA Program, Curitiba, Brazil. Janice Richardson, Insight–International advisor on literacy, rights & democracy, Luxembourg. Pierre Verlyck,

Chief Executive Officer, POP School, Paris, France. Susan Walker, Associate Professor in Family Social Science, Founder of the Parentopia Project, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Does teleworking contribute to work-family balance or is it just a way to work more?

Overall, participants agreed that telework and remote work is largely positive, as it reduces commuting time and allows time to be used more flexibly. As such, many women workers can multitask and manage their time more efficiently and distribute better the household duties with men (e.g., taking care of domestic chores throughout the day). Tracey Burns said remote working can aid in balancing work and family life. Besides, it creates opportunities for people with limited mobility who may not otherwise be able to take part in the workforce. Technology is making work possible for a lot of families, Susan Walker confirmed, adding that it is not necessarily that we are working from home, but that technology is allowing work from anywhere. Tom Harrison added that teleworking does not imply working more but working differently: "Some of the differences are good and some of not so good. I'm inclined to apply a moral theory perspective to this, which examines what drives the behaviors, judgments, and choices we make. My work and others' have shown that how we manage ourselves in face-to-face settings, in terms of how we act related to regulations and rules, tends to not work as well in an internet-based environment. Janice Richardson referenced studies that have shown that when people could work from where and when they wanted, their output was much greater: "Analyzing work efficiency should be a question of output rather than hours." Richardson also highlighted three other issues with remote working. Firstly, that when people are working from home and looking after children at the same time, which many parents and especially mothers are forced to do, this is fair neither to the parents nor to the children. Secondly, employers should not expect employees to answer questions after a certain hour of day. Thirdly, she recommended that maintaining a schedule (e.g., going for a walk after lunch) can help to balance work, family, and physical exercise.

Pierre Verlyck also described the benefits and downsides of telework. On one hand, telework can be a way to better balance professional and family responsibilities; telework allows for more flexible schedules, which enables people to be present "at the right time" for their family – not just when they return home from work. It allows women to be physically closer to their family members, avoid commuting, and may allow them to take breaks in their work schedule to perform household tasks, thus freeing up time for family. On the other hand, working at home can mean working more; schedules can be extended, and employees may have difficulties logging out. Tracey Burns also highlighted some downsides: "People do tend to get sucked in. We have all experienced Zoom fatigue during the COVID period. It is a good reminder that interactions over the screen are more tiring and draining than those in real life. The way that digital screens have increasingly integrated into parents' and children's lives and parents' time makes it hard to distinguish between work and family time. The devil is in the details and it's all about how adults manage that time and the kind of interaction they have with their family and make sure this time is not just screen-based, and you have boundaries between work and personal that you can distinguish." Luci Pfeiffer said that teleworking with children around is not an easy way to work, underlining that being forced to telework during a pandemic is very different from teleworking in a normal time. Jessica Navarro added that discussions about teleworking should not just be about how it impacts the family but also about how family impacts the workplace, the quality of work, and how people feel about it. "In my particular case, I have 3 children here at home with me. That is constantly impacting the quality of the work I'm able to do."

Can the remote learning experience of COVID-19 help to improve education?

The participants generally agreed that the experiences of pandemic-induced lockdown can improve education, as it has shed light upon what does and does not work, and how improvements can be made. Throughout the discussion, it became apparent that all the stakeholders in educational settings (i.e., children, women, parents, caregivers, teachers, and institutions) have different needs that must be addressed to see improvement overall. However online education is not able to provide the same opportunities for supporting the development of student's soft skills and socioemotional wellbeing. Tracey Burns stated that she believes remote learning will improve education overall. COVID-19 highlighted inequalities that existed prior; concerns about learning loss and the most vulnerable children being the most at risk are not new. What COVID did was shine a light on the weaknesses in our system. Students with the fewest digital skills and without parents to help them with their homework were very easily marginalized and disenfranchised. These kids are at risk at multiple levels and recent experiences have underscored a need for systematic and equitable changes to education. Tracey recommends that policymakers and educators should assess their pedagogies and rethink how to use technology innovatively and creatively, as opposed to trying to recreate a traditional school setting online. COVID-19 lockdowns reminded us that schools are the social fabric of our communities; school is not just a building but a place where communities meet face-to-face and engage with one another to stimulate socioemotional development and wellbeing.

Amina Fazlullah also discussed issues of unequal access to education, and the importance of the internet as a delivery mechanism. Is not easy to just flip a switch and delivery classes online. Throughout COVID-19, educators dug in and asked hard questions about digital inclusion in their community. Asking about connectivity and devices is difficult, and many have found it necessary to find creative ways to ask questions about digital inclusion. It is more than devices and connectivity, but also about training and IT support. Educators have grappled with the myriad prerequisites necessary for students to be able to engage meaningfully in class, and this information will likely be translated beyond COVID-19, into classrooms after the pandemic. She urged the inclusion of socioemotional learning and mental health support in the online education setting.

Tom Harrison believes that online education is not the same as bringing people physically together in a school setting and having human contact: "It's about transmitting knowledge, it's about people passing exams, it's about people getting assessments and learning knowledge, but where is the transformative element? The transformative elements in the past, the focus on wellbeing, the character qualities, and the values, social-emotional learning… that is what makes us human, but it also makes us who the employers want to have to work for them."

"I come from the land of remote learning, Australia. We've had remote learning for the past 70 years out of necessity," Janice Richardson said. The COVID-19 experience has helped improve education, but it is still very recent. While before it was an add-on, now we are seeing thinking outside the box and integration for real output and real learning. One-on-one moments with teachers are important to check in about these issues and this is more difficult in an online context.

Susan Walker agreed that COVID-19 improved online education, but that it depends on equality and access. She said that we must also consider the wide range of children and families: single-parent families, homeless families, children with special needs, and children with language issues. In terms of structure, growth, opportunities, COVID-19 has exposed the need for not only teachers to be trained to use the technology effectively but also for administrators and schools to put more resources into using technology in the classroom.

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