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the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by International Federation of Social Workers, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The International Federation of Social Workers is committed to promoting innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age toward achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, the priority theme for the 67th Session on the Commission on the Status of Women. Our federation encompasses 146 country-members; we strive for social justice, human rights, sustainable social development through social work best practices and engagement in international cooperation. Our 2021 policy, Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), affirms our support for, and role in, achieving these goals through sharing knowledge and collaboratively creating and establishing solutions.

Our 2022 policy, The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-social World, promotes co-building a new eco-social world grounded in a holistic human rights framework that encompasses human rights, cultural rights, ecosystem rights and the broader rights of nature. This policy acknowledges the gendered impact of intertwined crises of climate change, pandemics and conflicts, in particular the magnified care burden of neoliberal economic policy reductions in social protections, healthcare, and education magnified by coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Our commitment to wellness, economic empowerment, and resilience for all women in an eco-social world requires access to innovative technology for change and education for digital literacy which also serves to achieve the SDGs. The digital gender divide contributes to the exclusion and gender-based violence of women in rural areas, women living with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minority women. This exacerbates an increasing information gap to critical health services, educational opportunities, civic participation, and employment (USAID, Gender Digital Divide, 2022). This is a violation of the human right to the internet as declared by the UN General Assembly in 2016.

Promoting Innovation and Technological Change

Innovative and technological change through the use of digital tools can support women and girls' empowerment as social workers work towards co-building an eco-social world through sustainable entrepreneurship. Social workers support the establishment of long-term solutions for the wellbeing of the entire ecosystem, for current and future generations as articulated in our 2021 policy, Social Work and the United Nations SDGs.

Agriculture is the most important employment sector for women in developing countries and rural areas. Women and girls help to ensure food security (SDG 2) for their communities, build climate resilience (SDG 13) and strengthen economies (SDG 8) but their full potential is restricted through discriminatory laws, social norms, dependence on global trade systems, and a lack of access to technology (UN Women, Learn the facts: rural women and girls, 2021).

In co-building an eco-social world, social workers can amplify the work of women farmers that are driving digital transformation in rural areas for sustainable agriculture (European Broadband Competence Offices Network, 2021). Social workers work with communities to advocate for high-speed broadband and infrastructure, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial training to women farmers which provides opportunities to learn new skills, share and gain new information, and increase economic opportunities.

Digital Tools to Combat Gender Violence

Globally, one in three women experience violence; rural and indigenous women and girls are particularly vulnerable in their everyday activities such as fetching water and firewood or walking home from the market after dark (International Fund for Agricultural Development, *It's Time to End Violence Against Rural Women*, 2021). Because women and girls in rural communities frequently lack access to the internet, phones, and computers, they do not have information about available legal rights and community resources (Dianova, 2018). Accessible and affordable digital infrastructure that advances the safety of rural women and increases their economic empowerment is an effective solution to reducing their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Since COVID-19 violence against women and girls has increased, including digitally facilitated violence, especially among ethnic minorities, indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual, transgender women, and women with disabilities. Online forms of violence are associated with psychological, social, and reproductive health impacts, and often result in offline physical and sexual violence (UNWomen, *Online and ICT Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls during COVID-19*, 2020).

Social workers combat gender-based violence through treatment, prevention and policy responses. During COVID-19 lockdowns, providers harnessed technological resources to move to an online or telephone format (Virtual Support and Intimate Partner Violence Services). Asking survivors if it was a safe time to talk or text on the phone and the use of code words in text message interventions have been helpful interventions (Sabri et al, 2022).

Creating technologies like smartphone apps remove barriers that prevent women from accessing community information. The International Federation of Social Workers is committed to the protection of women against digital-based violence such as cyberbullying and invasion of privacy by embracing sustainable technology and innovation (SDG 9).

Health and the Digital Gender Divide

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers used technological innovations which contributed to helpful social support, ensuring safety of elderly and disabled, and creating learning communities as documented in our 2022 Ethics Webinars Report. Individually tailored digital interventions address many of the gendered social determinants of health that influence them (*Telehealth Interventions Designed for Women: an Evidence Map*, 2018).

Women are nearly twice as likely as men to suffer mental illness from a combination of stress, environmental, neurobiological, and genetic factors (*Uncovering the Hidden Impacts of Inequality on Mental Health: a global study*, 2018). Research by the World Health Organization asserts that there is a gendered dimension to the social contexts of depression, dependency and hopelessness. The digitalization of gender focused mental health services contributes to supportive environments for women and girls; social workers assist in the development of digital communicative capacities that facilitate the sharing of information, experiences, and innovative mental health solutions.

Only 57% of women are making their own informed decisions about sex and reproductive care (UN Stats, 2022). The reallocation of health resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic halted efforts towards achieving SDG 5, such as the assurance of reproductive health services (UN Policy Brief, 2020). These changes disproportionately affect rural women, with less than half living within a 30 minute drive of an obstetric care facility (*Improving Care for Rural Communities*, 2022).

Social workers' creation of obstetric tele-health is essential in providing rural women with pre and postnatal care. Online messaging builds relationships through communications technology and alleviates strains on small rural care teams (Improving Care for Rural Communities, 2022). The development of comprehensive sexuality education in the digital space represents a unique opportunity for women and girls to be educated, build solidarity, and develop critical engagement skills (Switched on: Sexuality Education in the Digital Space) thus enabling informed decisions. (SDG#5)

Education

Learning losses due to COVID-19 compounded by pregnancy and gender-based violence are widespread amongst marginalized and vulnerable girls. In schools that provided online learning, there were barriers to quality digital access (Shulz and Robinson, 2022) and challenges associated with a lack of digital literacy.

Interventions such as mobile phones, mobile health tools, media exposure, access to the internet, internet-based educational strategies, social media exposure, along with digital literacy training, help empower adolescent girls in low and middle-income countries access health services and information and enhance access to educational resources (Does Digital Literacy Empower Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, 2021). Improving technological access for women and girls is crucial in realizing the SDGs, and formulates a paradigm shift towards empowerment and self-determination of all women.

Recommendations

The International Federation of Social Workers supports the Commission on the Status of Women with the following recommendations on female empowerment and gender equality to innovation and education in the digital age. It is recommended that partnerships between the United Nations, civil society, and social work profession are supported, and committed to including women and girls in all decision-making bodies.

Invest in programmes that address digital literacy and access to broadband and empower women and girls to lead decision-making processes regarding the access, affordability, and usability of technological resources;

Develop technological training and innovation that promotes economic opportunities, as well as physical, and mental health for women and girls globally;

Unite and coordinate the digitalization of a reproductive justice curriculum that outlines preventative and remedial efforts to address gender-based violence and supports women and girls informed decision-making on sex and reproductive health;

Collaboratively develop gender-sensitive STEM programming;

Social workers support the advancement of the SDGs as a holistic approach to transform the world, and continue to partner with government, the United Nations, civil society, and non-governmental organizations to co-build and achieve gender equality and women and girl's empowerment in the digital age in an eco-social world.