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to 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 WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform, 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

WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform is a national network of 58 organisations and 115 professionals working together for gender equality and women's rights worldwide. To achieve its goals, WO=MEN partners with, among others, CREA, the Association for Progressive Communications, the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative and Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos in the Our Voices, Our Futures consortium. This feminist consortium works to amplify the voices of women human rights defenders and structurally silenced people in Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Sudan and Uganda. This includes lesbian and bisexual women, trans diverse persons, sex workers, and women's human rights defenders. Together, we work to enhance visibility and access for these groups in civic and digital spaces, responding to the systemic silencing exacerbated by anti-gender and anti-democracy forces.

Across the world, anti-gender and anti-rights movements are gaining momentum, posing significant threats to feminist organizing and structurally silenced communities. This global rise in backlash is evident through increased state surveillance, criminalization of activism, and the spread of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. In Bangladesh, The Digital Security Act and other punitive laws and policies have limited the capacity of Women Human Rights Defenders and Structurally Silenced People to champion for issues online and offline. Lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people are targeted with online hate speech and threats of violence. Sex workers are criminalized, hindering their access to digital platforms. In India, transgender women face discrimination in accessing healthcare, education, employment, thus limiting their meaningful participation online. Women journalists and activists face online harassment, including trolling, doxing, and death threats. Further, the lack of affordable internet connectivity, digital literacy skills, and safe devices limit access to digital spaces for many women and people. In Lebanon, women from rural areas may lack internet access and skills, limiting their online engagement. Women politicians and activists are subject to online harassment and smear campaigns. In Kenya, people in rural areas lack internet infrastructure and digital literacy to ensure their participation in issues and information that may involve them. In Uganda, the state restricts through laws and policies online expression and surveillance, which enables an environment where online harassment, and violence toward women and people from marginalized groups face disproportionate rates of online gender-based violence, harassment, and surveillance. In Sudan, the recent military coup has restricted internet access, which continues to restrict information involving the current situation of persons in Sudan to the rest of the world, and also within its borders.

WO=MEN and its members and partners have witnessed ongoing political instability, civil war, humanitarian crisis, internet and media shut downs, arbitrary arrests and extra judicial killings of Human Rights Defenders who challenge the State, and the blatant disregard of citizens' rights as enshrined in International laws and policies. In Sudan since 2021, the political strife has witnessed the marginalization of women and people from structurally silenced groups, with the displacement of more than 10 million people, most of whom are women, children and structurally silenced people. The humanitarian crisis has aggravated the severe restrictions on access to vulnerable communities amidst mass displacement and reports of widespread killings. In Lebanon, tensions linked to the Israel-Hamas conflict have led to attacks on civilian targets and a clampdown on rights of lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people. The economic crisis and political instability have disproportionately affected women and people from marginalized groups, limiting their access to resources and opportunities. We have witnessed the mass displacement of people, due to the continued genocide, encouraged by the west.

Similarly, the threat of the introduction of laws such as the Family Protection Bill and the Linda Jamii Constitutional Amendment Bill in Kenya and the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023 in Uganda target lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities, while disinformation and digital control tactics, such as those seen in Bangladesh and India, stifle feminist organizing and free speech. These archaic and unlawful laws and policies curtail the existence of structurally silenced people, while creating environments that are strife with violence and discrimination. Addressing the diverse identities and experiences of these women, particularly the structurally silenced, due to their chosen labor or activism, is key to inclusive engagement. In most countries and in particular, where Our Voices Our Futures has a presence (Kenya, Sudan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, India, and Uganda), sex work is criminalized. The criminalization of sex work increases physical, sexual, psychological, structural, and economic violence against sex workers. In these cases sex workers are oppressed through criminal law, local regulations, and punitive practices of law enforcement. The decriminalisation of sex work would redress past harms, affirm the dignity of structurally silenced women, and stimulate positive change. Bringing about social justice for sex workers would mean that sex work is regarded as work and legalized. WO=MEN and many of its partners including in the Our Voices, Our Futures consortium have facilitated the sharing of personal stories and experiences of sex workers which have helped raise awareness and build empathy, ultimately fostering a more inclusive society.

Key Recommendations

We call on states to:

Promote digital inclusion and adopt inclusive digital policies that prioritize access, accessibility, autonomy, and equity for women and girls in all their diversity. There is a need to expand internet connectivity and affordability, especially in rural areas and for marginalized communities, to ensure that information is accessible to all persons regardless of their location. States should be encouraged to promote digital literacy by providing training and resources to enhance digital skills for structurally silenced women and people.

Enact and enforce laws, policies and systems that protect women human rights defenders and structurally silenced people from online harassment, surveillance, and smear campaigns. States should investigate, prosecute and hold perpetrators accountable for attacks on women human rights defenders and structurally silenced people. States should also create and support safe spaces, support networks and mechanisms for women human rights defenders and structurally silenced people.

Counter digital censorship and surveillance, by repealing laws that restrict online freedom of expression and access to information. It is pertinent to hold governments accountable for using surveillance and censorship to silence dissent, as this curtails the freedom of expression. We call for the support of initiatives that promote digital security and privacy for activists and marginalized communities.

Enact comprehensive laws to criminalize online gender-based violence and ensure access to justice for survivors. This may be done through supporting organizations working to prevent and address online harassment and abuse is crucial as well as raising awareness about online gender-based violence and its impact on marginalized groups is essential. To empower structurally silenced women, we must invest in community-led organizations, provide funding and resources for their advocacy efforts, and support initiatives that promote intersectional feminism and address the unique needs of marginalized groups.