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entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Centre for Social Research, 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

Access is Empowerment: Ensuring Women's Involvement in the Internet Revolution

Equality as a right has seized the lives of women across the globe. Be that the gender biased roles that women in rural areas are imposed with or the high levels of disparities that women in the urban areas are dealing with. Leaving the boundaries of the real world far behind, the issue has entered the online space as well where women and girls are highly discouraged to be present on the virtual space, solely because of its unscreened outreach and exposure to the world. Extending the list, online abuse has been lately added to the gory list of crimes counted under Violence against Women.

While Information and Technology continues to emancipate the users with free flow of information and provides platforms to raise concerns, it is an irony that women are made to rethink information and communications technology as a bane. With the Sustainable Development Goals taking shape and considering substantive gender equality and realization of women's empowerment to be the decisive factors of a better world, it is time that technology and its implications are also brought into discourse.

As Internet World Stats reports, there has been a gigantic increase in the number of internet users across the globe, rising from less than 1 per cent to 40 per cent (over three billion users). The Internet has been used as a great resource to connect, spread information and awareness, bring an issue to discourse, reach out to the disconnected and various other profound uses. But fewer women across the globe have been the beneficiaries of the technology. The escalating gender gap and its absence from the state level discourse is leading towards a huge divide on the virtual space.

The Women and the Web report by Intel, mentions that Internet's access and usage increases women's income potential, women's sense of equity and sense of empowerment. A dedicated global effort to address the Internet gender gap could double the number of women online within three years. Although access to the Internet is spreading rapidly in developing countries, women are nearly 25 per cent less likely than men to be online. This gender gap — which today prevents a staggering 200 million women from participating online — is projected to perpetuate. (http://www.intel.in/content/dam/www/public/us/en/documents/pdf/women-and-the-web.pdf)

The need of the hour is to create a comprehensive understanding of gender equity and social justice as key components of internet usage. Identifying the factors that could be the possible blockades for the women and girls to use the Internet or the reasons for them to shy away from it, will definitely help the public and private sector influencers to either change the way the Internet is looked at or bring in the desired controls for the user's convenience.

We also need to understand that the problems and the issues by the women and girls in the virtual space are actually taking them away from it for a long time and then to convince them again to be on it is possibly a dicey task. This is also decreasing the resourcefulness of the Internet as a platform to lead the movement on

gender equality and actually putting it in the dark box of another unsafe and unsecure platform.

The primary reason that has been the pull factor of discouraging a lot of users is the privacy, security and control of their information online. They do want to share but are unsure as to who all is it reaching to. As it is estimated that 450 million new women users (Source: Women and the Web, a report by Intel) are expected to come online, it is time to identify, rectify and present the Internet as a platform that empowers rather than an accessible tool for criminal activities.

Access is empowerment, the idea that has to be supported and highlighted, to fill the users with a sense of security along with the benefits that they can actually reap of the Internet. Talking about the pull factors, Cyber Bullying, Trolling, Hate Speech, Security and Privacy Issues, Fake Identities, Report mechanisms, Community Standards, Safety Policies etc. are the ones that top the chart and needs to be resolved at the earliest to prevent the clipping out of a very potential user base.

A lot more awareness has to be spread among the users so that they know all the mechanisms of their online safety, counter speech being one of the very important tools. The tools that are provided on the Internet or specifically on the social media networks do serve the purpose of securing information but being safe online is beyond this. Sensitization of the users to counter the hate speech is also a necessity and to put this in place, a multi stakeholder approach is of utmost importance.

Diverse groups, from public and private sector both have to come together and discuss the changes that the time calls for along with revisions in the present mechanisms. What a collaborative effort can really do is the identification of the loopholes/issues at all levels and give a holistic perspective in context of technology, attitudinal changes, behaviours, social norms, law and psychology.

The need to promote the culture of mutual respect and behaviour holds the same importance in the virtual world as much as the real one. Anonymity as we see has been something that has really brought in the culture of hatred and criminal activities in the online space. It has to be dealt with appropriate verification processes so that it is no more an opportunity for people to harm others at any space.

At Centre for Social Research, we have initiated programmes to address the negativity that comes with the virtual world becoming more real. Primitive and regressive ideas like patriarchy, racism, and other discriminating power structures are also being observed in the online world. So how do we change it? Well, the only way to beat hate speech is by engaging in more positive, nuanced, and informed speech.

The users of other social media platforms are ever increasing, where the youth holds the maximum space. The growing number of participants in global dialogues is truly fascinating. Our programme emerged as a result of this fascination, envisioned as a free democratic platform, where we are encouraging the young minds to channelize their energies on social media and use it for social change.

If we intend to have gender equity and the realization of women's rights and empowerment in its real sense, then the virtual space can certainly not and should not be ignored. The reach that the social media platforms have today is vast and the need of the hour is to channelize the resources and minds towards creating safe online spaces for all.

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