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## Commission on the Status of Women

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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 Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, 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.



## Statement

Young people – including adolescent girls and young women in their diversity – living with and affected by human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV) have found that digital technology can transform access to health services and advance their sexual and reproductive health and rights. This is borne out by research involving the Global Network of People Living with HIV.

However, in order for digital technology to contribute to advancing gender equality and to the empowerment of women and girls in their diversity, rights must be protected in the digital space by strong, inclusive governance and accountability mechanisms. This includes acknowledging the digital gender divide as a fundamental violation of women's and girls' rights and addressing it to advance equity and agency among young, marginalised girls and women.

The Global Network of People Living with HIV is part of a consortium with the Graduate Institute in Geneva, the Kenyan Legal and Ethical Issues Network in HIV and AIDS (KELIN) and Stop AIDS called the Digital Health and Rights Project. We collaborate with youth-led networks, including the Global Network of Young People Living with HIV. Drawing on a research project we are undertaking in Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam, we are advancing a youth-led, gender-responsive rights-based approach to ensure that the rights of young people in all their diversity are protected, respected and upheld throughout their engagement with digital health technology.

For many young adolescent girls and young women, the digital transformation in health is empowering. It enables them to anonymously access information about HIV, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and sexual and reproductive health they urgently need, but feel unsafe seeking elsewhere. Using their mobile phones, they can find information and advice on topics such as menstrual health, contraception, abortion and pregnancy, and sexual transmitted infections. It offers a free space to innovate, and access peer support or "online families" who provide help and life-saving support.

### Accessing safe, accurate health information

Online forums, including Whatsapp groups, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels, can provide a safe space for young women and gender diverse young people to ask questions about their sexual health and explore aspects of their sexuality, without encountering negative reactions, judgement, disapproval or ostracization.

Love Matters Kenya, a Facebook group, has amassed nearly two million followers for advice and debate on sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. The group intentionally uses youth-friendly imagery and language and alternates playful posts and questions with serious health-focused content in order to deliver accurate, sex-positive information to young people.

However, the proliferation of online health forums can also result in a confusing overload of often conflicting information, whereby accurate, up-to-date and evidence-based health advice can be difficult to distil. More worryingly, misinformation or disinformation, sometimes deliberately circulated to support a regressive, anti-gender, conservative agenda, and appearing to come from authorised sources, can seriously mislead, compromise and endanger young people.

### The digital divide

The online world is deeply unequal. Inequalities such as gender, race, class, geography and other factors shape the design of and access to digital tools and technologies, and the experience of users. Though women play an important role in

both seeking health information and sharing it with others, many struggle to afford smartphones and airtime.

While the digital gender divide has been widely documented, the research participants described this divide as intersectional in nature, complicated by diverse forms of inequality. In all three countries, women shared challenges with access that ranged from family pressures, lower income and lack of ability to afford smartphones and data, and concerns about online harassment. In addition to the gender dimension, many focus group participants shared concerns about uneven digital access for young people in rural areas, as well as for young people with less education, those who spoke diverse local languages, persons with disabilities, and older people.

#### Online risks to wellbeing and exposure to harm

The digital transformation also brings risks to wellbeing and security. The potential for social media to have a negative impact, particularly on the mental health of adolescent girls and young women is well evidenced. Young women in the study also strongly emphasized their concerns about their own mental health due to a perceived high degree of dependence on mobile phones, which had increased during COVID-19 restrictions. This dependence – sometimes described in terms of addiction to phones, whereby young people feel compelled to spend time on their phones including when they don't want to – can cause young women to lose touch with their surroundings, even to the point of missing school or exams. Research participants described feeling that they did not exist without their phones, and the lack of a phone as a kind of social death.

Online communities may be lifesaving for some; however, a range of gender-based harms can also be linked to using digital platforms, including censorship, bullying, extortion and on- and offline violence, and cyberbullying linked specifically to seeking health information, coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer online, or championing sexual and reproductive health and rights. Experiences of sexual harassment online are common among women. Sex workers have reported being blackmailed by former clients with their intimate images and have little or no course for redress in countries where sex work continues to be criminalised, as reporting incidents to the police would expose them to risk of arrest themselves.

#### Privacy, digital rights and governance

The question of who has access to what data and how online privacy is protected remains a black box for most girls and young women who are active in digital spaces, both at a micro and macro level. Young women and girls using digital health technologies often have no idea – and no way of knowing – whether their private health information was being sold to third parties without their knowledge or consent. Others worry that online searches could expose them to the risk of arrest or exposure, for instance as a young woman seeking an abortion in a country where abortion is illegal, or as a lesbian, transgender or bisexual woman. There is a pressing need to inform young people – especially girls, young women and gender diverse communities about their digital rights.

Digital governance to protect against the diverse harms and threats that digital technology poses is weak at national and global levels. Globally, digital governance is at an early stage of development. While numerous ethical standards and guidelines have been produced, there is little awareness of these at national levels among user groups, especially young people. At country level, national digital strategies are often incipient or missing altogether. Countries lack comprehensive frameworks built on the lived experience of communities – especially those most at risk of harm. And the common lack of a national coordinating body to oversee and implement digital

governance opens the way for duplication and gaps. There is also a glaring lack of young women's participation in digital governance, while laws and policies are being drafted and shaped by private sector companies. This must change. A rights-based approach to digital technologies in health must be built on the meaningful participation of civil society and communities – including young people in all their diversity – in national and global governance of digital health.

In order to harness technological change and innovation to advance gender equality and empower all girls and young women, we need to demand digital justice to radically shift power to young women – including women from marginalised communities, such as those living with HIV, sex workers, those who use drugs, displaced and migrant women, and those with diverse or gender non-conforming sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and bodily characteristics. To realise this shift in power, governments, donors, health advocates of all ages and civil society must mobilise to promote digital rights, using an intersectional lens that addresses diverse forms of digital inequality.

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