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Statement submitted by Canadian Federation of University Women, Federación Mexicana de Universitarias, Graduate Women International (GWI), and Women Graduates – USA, non-governmental organizations 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

67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women Priority Theme: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls

Women Graduates – USA is a member organization based in the United States with a focus on national issues having international implications. Our main areas of programme and advocacy are Education, Violence Against Women with an emphasis on Human Trafficking in all its forms, Women's Global Health, Education including equal and safe access to education for refugees especially women and girls and support for the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, 5, 10 and 17.

The world faces a looming education crisis that threatens to reverse decades of progress in expanding learning opportunities. Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic forced unprecedented school shutdowns blocking some 1.6 billion learners at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels from the classroom. Compulsory social distancing due to COVID-19 created more dependency on technology and forced the rapid adaptation of education methods to digital platforms. School shutdowns affected women and girls particularly, putting them at a higher risk of dropping out, of losing their fundamental human right to education, and of jeopardizing their present and future academic and professional opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the digital disparities that already exist in society, namely that digital access is lowest for the least privileged. With nationwide school closures in 191 countries and almost half of the world population without access to the internet. Lack of access to technology exposed the vast discrepancy in home e-learning environments between men and women. Women and girls studying remotely are more likely than men and boys to spend time on housework and caregiving, preventing them from solely concentrating on studies.

Through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (accelerating action through digital technologies: strengthening digital skills and capacities for human wellbeing) the United Nations declared access to the internet as a Human Right. Still, an estimated 37 per cent of the world's population – or 2.9 billion people – have never used the Internet. In November 2021, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs), confirmed that the ability to connect online remains profoundly unequal. Of those still offline, an estimated 96 per cent live in developing countries.

We are at risk of losing 20 years of progress in education for girls – pregnancies and early child marriage are increasing, and conflict and war and climate changes are occurring more frequently. Once their education is disrupted, many girls will not return to school. The gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys, is true of rich and poor countries alike. Economic, social, and cultural obstacles prevent or limit women's access to, use of, and benefits from ICT (information and communications technology). Although geographical isolation and poor technological infrastructures can affect both men and women, the physical inaccessibility is exacerbated by power inequalities and socio-cultural norms.

Distance learning strategies are essential. Distance learning has promising possibilities towards equal, safe, and inclusive access to education for all, but only if women and girls have access to the right technology. Giving women and girls not only access to digital resources, but also the knowledge, training, and confidence to

design and use them, will ensure that they are not further marginalized in an increasingly digital world post-pandemic.

The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes education more flexible and accessible, allowing disenfranchised populations to cross the systemic barriers they face to access quality lifelong education. If digital learning is to thrive, reliable and inexpensive internet connectivity to the internet is required, especially in remote places. Even in the United States a vast income, race, and geographical divide exists. Globally, 29% or 346,000,000 young people aged 15–24 years are not online. Achieving the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals means finally closing the gap in the technological divide. Many online activities, such as job searches, creation of a curriculum, school education for children, or training courses for adults, need adequate tools to be carried out.

Technology today dominates all aspects of our lives. Women’s leadership and participation at high-level decision-making in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields is critical in shaping evolving technology towards mindful management of digital world. Technology is also a portal to balanced gender-sensitive leadership.

Women are not leading in sufficient numbers because of a multitude of educational, systemic and gender bias inhibitors, which create significant barriers to entry. The first impasse is gaining entry onto board and high-level decision-making positions; secondly, moving from tokenism to effective critical mass; and thirdly, the closed culture of male exclusion of women. Other barriers include:

the different leadership style of women is misconstrued as “less-than” or wrong leadership.

women still performing the majority of domestic child care responsibility at home.

extreme corporate demands are at an impasse to women’s priority of work-life balance.

women being marginalized, side-lined, and harassed by male leadership.

poor funding and finance for Women Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Leaders prevents women’s advancement.

While digital technology can provide opportunities for improving the well-being of women and girls, there are also dangers inherent in its ability to facilitate violence against them. In addition to those who face danger from social media, female politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders can also be harmed by it. Online violence takes various forms, such as persistent online harassment and threats, electronic monitoring of intimate partner’s movements and communications, and unauthorized entry into personal sites to capture or change data there. Moreover, these technologies also facilitate sex trafficking. Traffickers lure victims through fake ads, anonymous chat rooms and other social media sites. Sustainable Development Goal 5, Equality, targets violence against women. The digital environment must be transformed to reduce the harm that can be found online by legislation that restrains social media companies and includes recognition of online endangerment in its laws against sexual harassment.

As the demand for digital skills has grown exponentially, governments must put into place the infrastructure for training across all sectors and levels of education. The United Nations and its agencies, Civil Society and Member States at all levels of their governments need to rapidly seek the investment of billions of dollars toward closing the digital divide.

Increase education funding for distance learning and internet access

Switch from hotspots to lower-cost broadband options

Assist school districts in underfunded areas in making plans for how they will expand technology access

Encourage education groups to work together to find ways to share resources and help improve their communities' infrastructure using collective power

Investigate structural inequalities perpetuating funding disparities

Study ways to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future and share best practices with school districts and educators

Create public-school educational outreach efforts and develop partnerships.

Governments need to ensure that e-learning will not broaden existing digital inequalities and act to reduce such imbalances by ensuring equal access to digital tools and skills. By protecting the progress made in girls' access to education with gender-responsive, evidence-based, and context-specific actions and putting equity and inclusion at the center of all education policies, we can build back better.

Submitted by Women Graduates – USA

Co-sponsored by:

Canadian Federation of University Women, Federación Mexicana de Universitarias, Graduate Women International (GWI).
