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Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women’s European 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

Technological change is all around us, and the digital world is an everyday reality across much of the world, particularly in the Global North. However, technological change is characterised by significant inequalities both across and within regions and countries; access is taken for granted by many on higher incomes, while low income, rural and minority women, girls and communities are left behind. Innovation, and access to the results of innovative practices, also vary significantly. There is a major opportunity to strengthen women's and girls' life opportunities through technological change, but it is critical that access to basic modern technology is improved for all women and girls, women and girls can meaningfully and increasingly engage in shaping development of the digital world and digital platforms, providers and developers prioritise services that meet women's and girls' needs. Online safety is a critical prerequisite for ensuring innovation and technological change can truly empower women and girls.

Women can significantly benefit from innovation and technological change. For example, online systems can enable rural women and girls to access entirely new education and job opportunities, which can have concrete benefits for women's and girls' skills, knowledge and ability to claim their rights, as well as their incomes. Technology can also enable women and girls to create and engage with networks that can further strengthen their capacity to advocate for their rights and engage in democratic processes, while supporting information sharing and solidarity. Technological advances can also reduce time and energy intensive physical work, both in workplaces and within the home, which can create new space for women and girls to seek education, participate in society and enjoy free time, as well as focus on different tasks in the workplace.

However, access to all types of technology and innovation is very unequally distributed worldwide, and this in itself deepens inequalities, even as many women and girls are excluded completely, often due to the intersecting impacts of poverty and cultural norms. This was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic, where young people from the lowest income households were often unable to engage in virtual education, falling behind their wealthier peers with major impacts on life opportunities. As highlighted by the UN, a significant proportion of girls have not returned to education post pandemic at all, and face greater risks of forced marriage and exploitation as well as intergenerational poverty. Women from low income backgrounds across the world continue to spend proportionately more time on housework and are more likely to engage in heavy manual labour than other population groups, as technology is primarily developed for male dominated and/or higher commercial value processes and are facing an uncertain future, in direct contradiction to the aspirations of Agenda 2030.

Women and girls worldwide also face major risks of discrimination in the context of technology and online violence. Technology companies and industries remain male dominated, and many perpetuate misogyny and patriarchal norms both through their products and services, and workplace cultures. This is particularly the case in technologies based on algorithms and artificial intelligence, which reflect the attitudes of creators and have been shown to literally code in discrimination against women and girls, which is difficult to address once the technology is built. Online media platforms and companies to date have taken limited action to protect women and girls from increasing, multiple forms of harassment and violence, thus contributing to normalising violence against women and girls. As a result, many women and in particular young women feel scared or avoid going online, which limits their horizons and potential life opportunities. The largely normalised violence against women in public life is also deterring women from putting themselves

forward, which has a direct impact on democracy, in a context where women are significantly underrepresented in most societies. The vast majority of women and girls are further deterred by the ubiquitous, sexist imagery of women and girls, and content creators who employ technology to popularise fake body ideals that harm in particular young women's mental health in measurable ways.

The core issue at hand is misogyny and patriarchal norms, which are heightened across many technology and digital services sectors, as these are traditionally male domains where women remain the exception. Gender stereotypes continue to drive this trend, as across the globe, schools and families continue to discourage girls from studying technology related subjects: girls as young as six have internalised views that 'maths is not for girls', while recent UNICEF research shows that girls across the world have poorer maths skills than boys due to gender stereotyping, and in the United Kingdom alone, less than a fifth of computer science, engineering and technology students are women. Action to address such inequalities can also perpetuate the same stereotypes, where it prioritises science and technology as high value fields at the expense of sectors such as humanities and caring, defined as low value and priority.

In Northern Ireland, this is the approach of a new skills strategy designed to increase traditionally low productivity in the region, without detailed analysis of the factors driving low skills and low incomes, which affect women in particular.

There are opportunities to address the situation, and ensure women and girls can benefit from digital advances and in particular digital education in all its forms. An early step is improved protection of women and girls online, through strengthened moderation of content and more timely and effective mechanisms for dealing with reported content, particularly on social media platforms. Governments have a role in ensuring up to date legislation on data protection, online safety and violence against women and girls, and enabling effective implementation and enforcement of legislation. Public education and information campaigns can highlight the impact of online violence against women and girls and help challenge norms and stereotypes.

Women and girls also need improved access to all types of technology, regardless of income and social background. This can be achieved through global, multilateral collaboration and investment in digital infrastructure, and building on international standards that commit states parties to ensuring equal access to education and participation in society. These standards also commit states parties to eliminating gender stereotypes, which is a longer term, cross cutting priority for addressing the gender biases in society that perpetuate discrimination in technology.

Addressing all of these areas is a necessary prerequisite for enabling women to engage more with technology, which is the core mechanism for ensuring all women and girls can benefit from digital opportunities. This includes enabling women and girls to choose careers in technology and digital fields and developing and nurturing women leaders in these sectors, as well as creating opportunities for women and girls to shape the development of products and services. Multilateral mechanisms for strengthening this exist, and can be strengthened for example through the UN Generation Equality initiative, which includes technology as one of the priority themes.

There are major benefits to be gained from effective action, which is also urgent to ensure women and girls do not fall further behind, as currently predicted for Agenda 2030 goals. Women and girls have significant talent, skills and creativity to bring to the sector, while enabling women and girls to meaningfully engage with technology can help speed up gender equality, reduce poverty and improve the life opportunities not only of current, but future generations of women and girls.