Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-seventh session
6–17 March 2023
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
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 All India Women's Education Fund Association, 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

The All India Women's Education Fund Association, a voluntary organization, was founded in 1929, by visionary women of that period who were also the stalwarts of India's freedom movement, to empower women and girls. Recognising that formal education would be an important catalyst for change, the organisation founded the Lady Irwin College, Asia's first home science college, in 1932, to inculcate a scientific temper in women's education.

During these eventful nine decades, over 90,000 women have received graduate, post graduate and doctoral degrees from the college. For over six decades the organizational efforts were directed towards the building, establishment and administration of the college. From the 1990s the organization shifted focus to diverse gender issues and urgent social action required for the mainstreaming of women in the development process.

The organisation completes almost three decades of engagement with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and international agencies and eight years of commitment towards accelerating growth in the last decade of the 2030 Agenda for Development.

Traditionally the programmes for empowering women had been in the fields of health, nutrition, sanitation and later, legal awareness. In a strategic shift two decades ago, these programmes came to encompass holistic development including income generation activities and the use of information technology as a viable tool for development.

The organisational engagement in innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls can be divided into three phases.

The first phase commenced two decades ago with the launch of the 'Computers for Schools' project on International Women's Day on 8 March 2002, with some used computers and uninterruptible power supply devices donated by the Government's telephone department and a resource person sponsored by a computer training institute. The objective was to train teachers and students once a week, so that these teachers could in turn hold practice sessions for the students during the remaining days of the week. With such meagre resources, basic computer awareness was imparted in six government schools, and 1,500 primary school students could be reached.

In the evenings, these same computers were used by the organization to teach the basics of computer hardware and Microsoft Word to Afghan refugees.

When these schools received new computers assigned by the Government, the organization relocated these computers to the rural areas of Tipari, Daboda and Pataudi in the Indian state of Haryana. Computer tables were provided and a local youth was trained to conduct adult computer literacy classes for unlettered rural women. Further, computer skills in Basic and Microsoft Office were also introduced among batches each of 20 underprivileged students who had no other access to computers.

Thereafter, three national stakeholder workshops and meetings in Delhi, Bangalore and Indore were held to disseminate the role of information and communication technology and to make the commitments of the Millennium Development Goals better known and to ensure that they were the focus for country action. Emerging issues were highlighted, especially the Government's role in the context of national policies to raise awareness and through e-governance, facilitate

access to information for the public. The private sector recommendations to harness technology and leapfrog into the future included the use of updated developmental practices and models, technology transfers and strategies based on local needs, generation of funding and skilled employment opportunities. The role of civil society included the identification of cross-sectoral social, cultural and local trends; building stakeholder partnerships at all levels, monitoring, implementation and evaluation mechanisms to promote equality between women and men and steps to ensure that the women's lack of computer literacy should not become another barrier to the empowerment of women.

The second phase commenced during the organisation's 85th foundation year in 2015 with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-partnered national conference on women's transition from education to full employment. The conference included a companion-compendium of case studies on 'women, education, skills and work' in the backdrop of the United Nations launch of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Government's Skilled India initiative where over 500 million people were to be trained by 2020 and its alignment with the key mission of 'digital India'.

As a tribute to a demographically young India, and the need for youth-focused programmes in skilling, re-skilling and upskilling, India's then Minister for Information and Technology launched the organisation's cyber security workshops for college students. Due to its academic linkages 35 workshops were held reaching over 5,000 students. A standardised curricula included surfing, email threats, social networks and chat groups, Facebook posts, e-frauds, mobile telephony, online harassment and persecution and in extreme cases identity theft. The team consisted of technical consultants and depending on the requirements, expert psychologists and lawyers. A contact number was shared to help students discuss issues or to seek support; a feedback form measured the success of each workshop including the need for holding more such workshops for students, fellow academicians, for parents and for policy makers to help them initiate effective policies.

Since the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals, innovation and technology have been the hallmark of the organisation's outreach programmes nationally, regionally, for the global south and at the United Nations. 'A world we women want' strengthened grassroots women's voices and mapped best implementation strategies from India, South Asia and Africa while linking rural activities with the Goals and sub-Goals; the common nature of problems faced in these two continents included a need for sustainable livelihood opportunities near their homes - easy access to finance to set up small enterprises and easy forward and backward linkages to sustain business initiatives. In 2019, India's successful zero-carbon footprint, home-based, low-cost economic model was showcased --- spinning and weaving of the khadi fabric – with marketing support by the Government channels.

The third phase commenced in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the world, forcing all to press the reset button. This new vision with fresh perspectives and innovative revivals needed to focus on the common good, leave no one behind, and build back better.

Disrupting conventional patterns of education, the pandemic powered innovation and forced technological change in education to include 247 million children who were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools out of the learning curve.

Reaching out to the most vulnerable, several stakeholder webinar series 'Sustainable Solutions for Persons with Disabilities', 'COVID-19 Community Connects' and 'Specific Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia)' reached out to around 20,000 people at a fraction of the cost.

The webinars revealed that organisations perceived the pandemic as an opportunity to develop resilient response mechanisms, inculcate healthy practices, create a database at organisational and government levels, develop technology and online platforms to support the new culture of work from home.

Providing a note of caution in the face of rising cases of mental health concerns, experts opine that technology should go hand-in-hand with conventional modes of communication and one cannot be at the expense of the other.

The feedback from our institutions of higher learning revealed that innovation in education has challenged both learners and teachers as learners became more of seekers and teachers became facilitators.

Though the benefits of innovation and technological change can provide scale and range to our initiatives, equitable access to the internet and smart phones still remain.

In a research pilot project for rural women in the state of Madhya Pradesh, the organisation is employing innovative technology to help women access markets for services, crafts and agro-produce.

Innovation, technological change and digitization by the national machinery have helped India's economy to transform as 78.6 per cent of women have bank accounts and participate in decision making; 198.6 million women beneficiaries have received direct benefit transfers; 43% of the total graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are women.

During the last two years of the Commission on the Status of Women's online programming, the organization partnered with the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in New York, and reached 1,150 participants, to highlight examples of women-led movements that are innovative, use technology, promote education and empowerment through environmentally-safe lifestyles, while safe-guarding and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals. These choices, when exercised by billions of people daily around the world, will give priority and parity to women, with the potential to take the empowerment of women billions of steps forward every day.

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