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Statement submitted by Dianova International, 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

On a global level, inequality between men and women is pervasive and unchanged in all spheres of society. Women and girls are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to report food insecurity, and more likely to be threatened and to suffer abuse at the hands of an intimate partner. All around the world, women's voices are raised to demand their equal rights, and yet, gender inequalities are still firmly entrenched in our cultures, perpetuating the barriers to women's full participation, including in the digital age.

Digital tools as advocacy and educational tools

Digital technologies have become essential to efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, especially through the speed of dissemination and reach of social media. Digital platforms allow women to create, share and discuss all kinds of information, ideas, experiences and opinions in real time. They make it possible for women's voices to be heard across the world and to highlight women's issues that are seldom discussed in traditional media. It is thanks to these tools that the #MeToo movement – against harassment, sexual exploitation and rape culture – has gained global momentum since 2017. They have also been used to support global campaigns to raise awareness among women and men, such as the United Nations' "HeForShe" campaign, that showed the world that gender equality is not just a "fight for women by women". Lastly, social media have also been key in amplifying the voices of those who are now challenging the authoritarian Iranian regime, and women are often at the forefront of protests.

In the development sector too, digital technologies are vital. From women's cooperatives that have increased their incomes and created new partnerships through programmes that enable them to learn about and benefit from digital technologies, to literacy and health education projects for rural women, there is no shortage of examples.

Digital tools as a tool of oppression

Yet, while digital technologies are a powerful agent of change for women's empowerment, they can also be an equally powerful agent of their oppression. Around the world, marketing campaigns on social media use women's bodies to increase corporate profits, based on a patriarchal capitalist system that dictates the standards of beauty and behaviour. In this model, a woman's appearance and hourglass figure takes precedence over her intelligence, achievements and self-worth. These advertisements lead women from all cultures to internalize these false and unattainable beauty standards in a race to self-objectification, with profoundly negative consequences for their mental health.

Online violence

The social media sphere is not egalitarian. In addition to the objectification of their bodies by marketing, women also face an ubiquitous gender-based violence that could be described as a human rights tragedy. According to a 2017 online survey conducted by Amnesty International in eight countries, 23 per cent of women have experienced some form of violence and harassment on social media platforms. In addition, women who participate in feminist debates, as well as female journalists and politicians, are frequently subjected to hate speech, and death and rape threats. Equally despicable is the rise of calls for violence on the "manosphere" – a term used to refer to a collection of websites, blogs and forums where some men, under the

guise of addressing “men’s issues” merely propagate the most detestable gender stereotypes and their hatred of women.

Online misogynistic expressions, as well as other forms of online gender violence, are a reflection of the heinous ideologies of the real world. Ultimately, it is not technology that is harming to women, it is people using technology to harm women. However, it is also questionable whether online misogyny is not a reflection of the tech industry’s gender bias: in the G20 countries, women make up only 15 per cent of the sector’s professionals, and the gap is widening rather than narrowing.

The key issue of resources

As a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the rights of women and girls, Dianova International is convinced of the need to invest heavily in their empowerment if equality is ever to be achieved. In the digital age, developing the right technologies and tools can also be one of the solutions to this challenge. However, looking beyond the unquestionable benefits of digital tools as well as their inherent problems – such as those mentioned above – one fact remains inescapable: the lack of resources.

Billions of people around the globe do not have access to a regular supply of electricity, let alone to the internet and mobile technology. This gap in resources primarily affects women, who earn less and therefore are less likely to afford computers or mobile phones, especially in low and middle income countries. It should be remembered that globally, men are 21 per cent more likely to have access to the internet than women, a probability which rises to 52 per cent in the least developed countries.

Researchers predict that 85 per cent of the jobs of 2030 have not yet been invented and will be created by new technologies. If we are to leave inequality behind, it is essential that women play their part in the development of these technologies.

Call to action:

- We call on governments across the world to adequately fund girls’ education, with a particular focus on digital literacy programmes as an essential part of women’s empowerment.
- Neither the private sector nor markets as such will solve the problem of women’s exclusion from the digital economy, therefore we demand that governments take action to incentivize companies to produce more affordable technologies.
- We stress the need for international organisations to play a full leadership role in tackling the structural inequalities that hinder women’s access to computers and mobile phones due to harmful social norms.
- We call on governments to foster more diverse and inclusive educational environments to promote and support girls and women in fields of study related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the gateways to careers in new technologies.
- We demand that the companies concerned develop strategies and programmes to support women and address the systemic barriers that hamper their career development.
- Lastly, we call on governments to consider how to effectively change the structures within which the patriarchal power exercises and dictates its norms and laws, whether at work, in schools, in society or within the state. We need to invent new ways of teaching, seeking and learning. Men and women should engage together in the digital revolution, on an equal footing, without biological

differences being used as a pretext for ideological gendered constructions. This is the price we will have to pay to finally benefit from the immense reservoir of talents and skills, still largely untapped, that half of humanity possesses.
