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Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of the Mission, Congregations of St. Joseph, Dominican Leadership Conference, Edmund Rice International Limited, Fondazione Proclade Internazionale – Onlus, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Loreto Generalate, International Presentation Association, Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto), Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Passionists International, Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Salesian Missions, Inc., School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, UNANIMA International, and VIVAT International, 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

As members and partners of the Justice Coalition of Religious, a formal partnership among NGOs representing Catholic Sisters, Brothers, priests and their mission partners at the United Nations, we welcome the commitment of this 67th UN Commission on the Status of Women to addressing the role of digital innovation—in the classroom and beyond—in the achievement of gender equality. Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching, we are proponents of a definition of “development” that requires equity among people of all genders as a reflection of their equal human dignity. Our global community seeks to bring about the common good through service to many of the most marginalised and remote communities of the world. From this position, we have borne witness to the tremendous potential of digital innovation and technology to catalyze development through the empowerment of women and girls.

In Hajipur, India, the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries are bringing various forms of digital media to women and girls in slums, social centers, and villages. Especially among those who are illiterate, the Sisters have found sharing inspirational and informational videos, songs, and theatrical performances are a powerful means to create awareness of unjust gender stereotypes and to open conversations that prepare women to speak up for their rights in local government and school meetings.

At Saint Mary’s Academy, a secondary school founded by the Sisters of Loretto in Colorado, USA, the Speech and Debate Team is utilizing digital research as an essential tool for facilitation of young girls’ exploration and development of their critical thinking and communication skills. At a stage in life when girls are at especially high risk of losing the confidence to formulate and express their own opinions, this extracurricular programme builds their comfort with identifying reliable data, performing critical analysis, and employing other research skills to understand both sides of a contentious societal issue and to debate with respect. Both of these settings exemplify ways in which digital access empowers women and girls to establish independent minds and strong voices in public discourse and in other arenas of life.

In these and other settings, our members report that the women and girls they serve are open and highly adaptive to new technology when given the opportunity to explore and develop their skills with it. They express deep concern, however, that women and girls in rural and migrant communities are at a heightened risk of being left behind digitally in comparison to their urban, native-born, and male counterparts. In the United States, the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) are addressing this resource gap at the SSND Educational Center for Women, which supports migrant women from many ethnic backgrounds in learning the local language and obtaining their secondary school diploma equivalency. In this setting, our constituents have found that, as a result of long-held gender stereotypes and roles, migrant women are often inexperienced with digital tools even when the male members of their households possess and use smartphones and computers at home. The Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart, who are providing social services to migrant women and girls in transit in Monterrey, Mexico, have observed similar cultural barriers to technology use among women and girls along with the added socioeconomic and logistical barriers to digital access that frequently characterise life as a person in migration. In both settings, Sisters note that migrant women’s well-honed resilience in adapting to new environments, their need to build new livelihoods to support their families, and their desire to maintain social support systems from a distance tend to make migrant women and girls highly motivated, enterprising, and agile students of new technology.

Through their work with female university students and young mothers, respectively, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Sisters of the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries in Kenya have both observed the need for public electricity and internet access points to which women and girls can gain access without risk of physical violence or harassment. They both note that this need is greatest in rural communities where internet cafes and major academic facilities are not within reach.

While our members extoll the many benefits of digital access and technological innovation for the empowerment of women and girls, they have also expressed that we cannot ignore the serious potential for exacerbation of gender-based inequalities and safety risks that are inherent in our digital world. They report significant need for women and girls to receive formal training in digital self-defense against online advertisements, propaganda, and other postings that seek to exploit, traffic, or terrorise them on the basis of their gender. The Sisters and mission partners of the Society of the Sacred Heart, who run a women's collective at Comunidad Crece, A.C. in Jalisco, Mexico, have highlighted that, given both access to technology and training in a community setting, women and girls have the capacity to construct their own digital safe spaces where they can foster one another's development from digital literacy to digital livelihoods.

On the basis of our experiences, we recommend the following actions from UN Member States to maximise the empowerment potential of digital innovation while minimising its risks to women and girls:

- Engage in dialogue with the administrators of academic, social service, migrant support, and housing facilities operated by faith-based and other public-good-oriented institutions to explore the possibility of their service as internet and computer access points for both the populations they already serve and the surrounding community if provided with State support in the form of digital infrastructure and security
- Establish a national digital literacy curriculum that includes components dedicated to internet safety, critical discernment of facts from misinformation, responsible communication, and reliable data identification and interpretation
- Promote gender-specific training—through both formal education and public communication campaigns—that educates men and boys about the deplorable nature of sexual harassment and violence of every kind, including in digital spaces, and that educates women and girls about their equal rights and capacities to engage in the creation and utilisation of digital technology
- Establish and enforce strict laws against online gender-based abuse, extortion, and exploitation
- Provide financial support and/or digital device provision incentives for secondary school extracurricular speech and debate teams and technology-related clubs whose membership is at least half girls
- Direct private-sector grants and short-term public subsidies to establishment of the cleanest locally appropriate forms of energy and broadband internet provision to speed the process of bringing electrification and digital connectivity to scale and organically reducing the cost of coverage to all localities
- Develop mobile units for digital literacy training and technical support for mothers of school-age children (and fathers in households where a mother is not present) that park at a regular rotation of essential public service access points (e.g. food pantries, water collection points) in rural regions

- Provide training for school-age children and adults on internet safety and critical reading for credible information and offer antivirus software subsidies and promotions as public health measures
- Promote free internet access programs and digital tool training for adult women that is linked to entrepreneurship topics that help them to promote an income for themselves and their families
- Establish recycling programs for the distribution of functional, used mobile phones (with and without internet capability), computers, etc. at no cost to marginalised communities and require completion of an internet safety training as a condition of device reception
- Promote women's digital content creation by reducing the cost of acquiring licenses that may hinder women from taking up digital employment

We look forward to collaborating with UN Member States and our partners in all sectors of civil society to realise these recommendations with preferential attention to the empowerment of women and girls who face the greatest risk of being left behind by the rapid evolution of digital technology and who possess tremendous untapped potential to guide that evolution toward equity and justice.
