



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 December 2022

Original: English

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 Maori Women’s Welfare League Incorporated, and Pacific Women’s Watch (New Zealand), 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

Pacific Women's Watch New Zealand (New Zealand), in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2010, works for gender justice and equality for all women and girls in New Zealand. The Māori Women's Welfare League, in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2021, was established in 1951 to advocate, and advance Māori women and their whānau (families). Te Ropu Wahine Māori Toko i te Ora – Māori Women's Welfare League is the only national charitable Māori women's organisation in Aotearoa. Since 1951 when the Māori Women's Welfare League was founded, it remains principally concerned with the well-being of Māori women and their whanau (family). The foundation documents of Pacific Women's Watch (New Zealand) declare our recognition of the indigenous Māori women as Tangata Whenua (People of the Land) and the Treaty of Waitangi as the founding document of New Zealand. The core goals of Pacific Women's Watch (New Zealand) are to monitor, review and report on progress in advancing the well-being of all women and girls in Aotearoa New Zealand. Together, the two organisations provide all-encompassing recognition of all women, taking into account the diverse ethnicities and cultures of peoples who presently reside in and call Aotearoa New Zealand home. Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is paramount. Education and innovation in digital technology is critical for all women and girls, with special focus needed to solve the challenges faced by Māori, Pasifika, migrant and disabled women and girls, rural women, and the Rainbow community.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, digital technologies are widely used and accepted in daily life. Digital technologies enable ever increasing interactions across communities. These connections have very positive aspects enabling women throughout the world to connect, share and support each other. Digital technology is a growing sector in New Zealand however, only 27 per cent of roles in the sector are held by women, Māori and Pasifika women's participation is not separately measured.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, not all parts of the country have adequate connectivity, people in such areas have limited access, particularly in rural areas. This was highlighted during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in which technology was widely used to allow schools, tertiary institutions and universities to continue to deliver courses and programmes. Digital technology enabled continued contact with teachers and delivery of content. As a result, schools and tertiary institutions transferred classes to online platforms. However, students with poor connectivity struggled to engage. To support these students, teachers resorted to delivering paper copies of material. Difficulties with involvement and engagement still continue, even though students are now expected to return to the classroom.

When it comes to measuring inequalities in education, access to education and technology is a growing challenge. As a nation, the divide between rural and urban education is already widening in Aotearoa New Zealand. Access to digital technology, particularly in education, highlights societal inequalities, notably among Māori women and girls, many of whom live in rural communities. COVID-19 highlighted these inequalities and created additional challenges for rural communities, particularly that of women and girls due to a lack of consistent internet connection and access to technologies needed to engage in learning curriculums. As a result, the access gap for technology and the internet is becoming a measure of poverty. The Minister for the Digital Economy and Communications has committed to investing in rural digital access.

Not all women and girls in well-connected locations have access to digital technologies. Household internet access may be severely limited due to low level

internet supply and/or limited availability of devices, sometimes with a single device shared. This added stress to already stressed households contributed to the rise in domestic violence among women and girls. These challenges experienced in areas with apparent good connectivity are commonly seen in low-income households, in particular Pasifika, Māori and migrant families, for whom the cost of connection to internet supply is an additional stress on household budgets. Lack of connectivity along with a lack of devices limits the engagement for all, but especially for women and girls. Efforts have been made, through schools, to supply devices to children. However, for many families poor connectivity continues to limit access.

As noted, the stress of managing online activity with limited resources has led to an increase in domestic violence experienced by women and girls in particular. Additionally, there is a concerning dark side of online abuse and stalking. Young women and girls and the Rainbow community are especially vulnerable to this violence. Many countries, including Aotearoa New Zealand are attempting to address this through legislation. Women and especially girls need further education and strategies empowering them to deal with harmful on-line activity.

Disabled women have led the way in the uses of technologies for maintaining and developing community networks, support and campaigns. Health consultations with medical practitioners is becoming more accessible online, but many online platforms for both work and social engagement do not equally offer access for all who may be hard of hearing, low-vision, neuro-diverse and many others who face challenges to engage fairly. Disabled women, girls and the Rainbow community in Aotearoa New Zealand also face the challenges of equitable access to technology and internet both in rural and urban places, leading to limited access to connectivity and participating as equal citizens in the digital world.

Gender inequality is not an invisible or faceless concept. The Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand are Māori, with early settlement dating back over a thousand years. Māori women held prominent leadership positions, prior to colonisation, with rights to chiefly titles, tribes, and land. The Māori epistemology begins with Te Kore (Great Darkness), Te Po (Long Night) and Te Ao Marama (The Light) and details the movement between distinct epochs in a life span. Understanding continuous sequential events is critical to Indigenous peoples' innovation and empowerment. Indigenous cultural approaches by indigenous peoples leads to innovation and prosperity.

In his annual state-of-the world address in 2021, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged world leaders to bridge six 'great divides'. Restoring balance for Māori women and girls would entail closing the gap between rich and poor, fostering gender equality, and guaranteeing that half of humanity that has no access to the internet is connected by 2030. Aotearoa New Zealand has the strongest correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and education achievement of any country in the OECD.

Māori students did not all have the means to work online at home during COVID-19 lockdowns, leading to some secondary schools resorting to sending out printed copies of class notes. Laptop computers and internet connections are not currently seen as indicators for measuring poverty. For many, distance learning, via digital technology remains unattainable, contributing towards an increased level of violence and abuse against women and girls. Inequality of opportunity is linked to a multitude of social and structural barriers.

In 1993, Māori Women's Welfare League filed a Mana Wahine claim with the Waitangi Tribunal arguing the Crown had failed to protect and ensure the rangatiratanga (self-determination) of Māori women. That claim is still being heard today, twenty-eight years later. The COVID-19 lockdowns forced an estimated

18,000, or 10% more, into poverty. Deeply entrenched poverty and deprivation afflict 150,000 children; nearly half of them are Māori children, with another 50% being Māori girls. Innovations, in an indigenous female technological sphere, that is driven, led and well-funded would overcome State failings to address digital access for Māori women and girls.

The intersection of the two themes emphasises the need of ensuring that all women and girls have equal access to education and technology so that they do not fall behind in a rapidly changing world. The Māori Women's Welfare League and Pacific Women's Watch (New Zealand) urge the Commission to promote equality for all, particularly the marginalised, Indigenous and migrant women, rural women, women with disabilities and those from the Rainbow community. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 and empowering all women and girls will require everyone to work together to find inclusive, long-term solutions to the world's evolving challenges, including bridging the digital gender gap for an inclusive recovery.
