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Statement submitted by Sociologists for Women in Society, 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

Introduction: Current Political and Social Context

For women and other minority genders, digital technology presents a double bind – opportunities for empowerment as well as the perils of disempowerment. On the one hand, technological innovations, and the internet in particular, have greatly contributed to the strengthening of transnational feminism through the dissemination of feminist networks on the web, allowing for renewed and continued conversations and solidarity across borders. This political globalization from below has played an important role in transnational and translocal sharing of women’s and other gender minorities’ lived experiences in all dimensions of gender inequality and their responses to them. Information on issues as well as on local organization, national social policies and programs and international agreements to address gender inequality have been widely shared through the digital world. In fact, the dissemination of Commission on Status of Women Written Statements as well as the Agreed Conclusions is made more accessible through the United Nations digital platform.

On the other hand, the internet and social media have played a central role in the resurgence of right-wing authoritarian movements, political parties and governments that have given centrality to sexism, homophobia and transphobia. The dissemination of fake news has promoted gender-based political violence posing further constraints to women’s and other gender minorities’ political participation in a world where political representation is one area of persistent gender inequality.

Technology is created in a dynamic world featuring various societal, cultural, economic, and political realities, and we need to acknowledge the potentially marginalizing effects of these realities; for example, the dominance of the English language in information systems or racist stereotypes and biases embedded in Artificial Intelligence software. Technology can certainly address barriers to economic and social development through; for example, access to financial services through mobile banking for women living in the Global South or a working mother’s ability to continue her education through online programs. Yet, for any initiative and intervention to be successful, we need to acknowledge and address not only socioeconomic and cultural barriers to inclusion, but also the ways technology will be experienced across different social groups and the unintended consequences of its use.

Recommendations to Member States:

Invest in making digital technologies accessible, affordable, available and safe for women and other gender minorities. Teaching women how to make digital content goes a long way, and can make a difference in women’s lives from domestic levels to national and international peace processes.

Invest and make available technology that can empower women and other gender minorities but cannot be used to enforce strict and traditional gender norms that do not benefit women’s and other gender minorities’ lives, disrupt their social movements, facilitate online threats and bullying or recruitment to extremist organizations.

Promote policies and practices that better protect women and other minority genders where necessary. They must be given better training to protect themselves in digital spaces.

Advocate for women’s and other gender minorities’ use of and access to technology and social media where it may be restricted by prevailing social norms.

Degendering Innovation

As sociologists, we recognize that technology is not created in a vacuum, but rather is a social product – our social structures shape both the production of technology and its diffusion. Gender inequality is reflected through technology. In part, this is because women and other gender minorities are largely absent from its creation – the design, production, dissemination, and implementation compared to men.

Feminist scholars also connect the lack of demographic diversity in tech work to biases in the very technologies being produced. Technologies are overwhelmingly produced for and by white men, often rendering them exclusionary, harmful, and/or dangerous to historically oppressed groups, including the most marginalized women, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, poor, and disabled. Such biased technology exposes women and other minorities to the risks of harassment, abuse and surveillance. Health-tracking tools, for example, may expose sensitive data on women’s reproductive health.

Recommendations to Member States:

Promote diverse representation in tech work that could shift the very nature of knowledge production and innovation, women as innovators – in all phases of technology – as intellectual producers and users of it.

Address vulnerability and empowerment in technology through broad societal changes that protect and advance women.

Making Technological Education Gender Inclusive

Technology has broadened the scope of women’s and other minority genders’ education, employment and access to information. However, a gender digital divide is evident in their exclusion from digital education, skills, employment and economic resources and significantly interferes with their empowerment.

As an association of sociologists, which includes educators, Sociologists for Women in Society recognizes the potential of technology for education and pedagogy, while also being attentive to its limits. The global pandemic highlighted the positive and negative aspects of technology for education. Digital platforms allowed teachers to continue their classes and remain connected with their students. And teachers have for a while now actively sought out and adopted new technology to support student success and learning. At the same time, existing inequalities in education intensified with the pandemic. The negative effects of the shift to a digital classroom were especially evident among students from disadvantaged socioeconomic status and marginalized spaces, especially in the Global South. Many students were unable to participate due to lack of necessary equipment, internet access, or a suitable space for work. Students who had competing responsibilities due to caregiving or jobs faced untenable expectations. The digital classroom also exposed students to surveillance and invasion of privacy as universities hastily adopted technology tools and software that did not always adopt best-practices regarding privacy. It is also important to highlight the risks associated with family violence that increased with extensive time at home, no outlets, less contact with others, and more stress and depression, plus addictions, and their related aggressive consequences.

Women and other gender minorities who have access to technology and use it to gain or extend education may face various forms of victimization. While technology increases visibility and opportunities for empowerment, women (Black women and women of colour especially) are often trolled and compromised. This is especially the case when overtly working to advance social justice. For example,

feminist scholars and activists for social justice sharing their views on social media routinely face online threats.

Recommendations to Member States:

Promote pedagogy and the reflection by institutions of education on how to address inequities in access to and experiences with technology in education exacerbated by the pandemic.

Promoting Women in Technological Work and Occupations

The digital gender divide, or women's and other minority genders' limited access to digital networks and its related opportunities affect their scope for employment. Globally, only 24% of computing jobs are held by women. In the technology sector, women are largely excluded from leadership and remain trapped in low-level service-oriented roles. As a workplace setting, the technology industry is saturated with persistent gender inequalities, as men continue to occupy the most powerful and well-paying positions. Stereotypes around race and gender shape attitudes towards, and beliefs about, workers, including ideas about who is an "ideal" tech worker. Having physical, ideological, or cultural differences from those with power in the workplace may also negatively affect access to social networks, availability of mentors that would advocate on one's behalf and promotion and future success. Since other sectors like education, finance and banking are quickly embracing digital transformation, the persistence of digital gender divide may lead to women's and other minority genders' increasing marginalization within these sectors as well.

Similar observations can be made for women from marginalized ethnicities, castes and religious groups in different parts of the world, revealing the intersectional nature of digital gender divide in the labour market. Several tech companies have started offering maternity benefits, childcare support and specialized training programs for women workers. But these opportunities are not guaranteed and they are mostly reserved for women in high-end roles. Employee Resource Groups on gender equity and for sexual minorities mostly offer short-term solutions, and do not resolve structural problems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work arrangements helped many women workers 'return' to employment, as they could work from home while taking care of their families. But the consequent overwork also led a large number of women to abandon relatively more stable employment for more flexible but low-wage gig work.

Diversity in Technical Work is Urgent For Economic and Social Justice Reasons.

Recommendations to Member States:

Set up digital training programs specifically for women from marginalized racial, ethnic, caste or religious groups.

Provide women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour with institutional support for their inclusion and success.

Promote policies and practices that reduce gender and racial discrimination in technological workplaces, including subtle forms of discrimination.

Fund and provide infrastructure to groups that organize coding bootcamps for women from marginalized racial and ethnic minorities.

Fund and support organizations like worker centers, refugee support groups and shelters that work closely with women from vulnerable communities to design training programs for women's digital literacy.