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Statement submitted by Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, 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

The Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, now known as Women First International Fund, partners with women and trans-led community-centered organizations in emerging economies in East Africa and South Asia to promote gender equity. Through multi-year grants, the Fund supports partners to build their capacity to sustain programs that enhance the economic empowerment of women, girls, and trans people with the goal of addressing widespread gender inequalities. Since its founding in 1969, the Fund has invested over US\$ 4 million in grants and impacted nearly half a million marginalized women, girls, and trans people globally.

Innovation, technological change, and education in the digital age are key drivers for long-term economic growth and achieving gender equality. However, the persistent gender digital divide, inequity in access to education, and the de-prioritization of education financing by governments all over the world create tremendous setbacks for achieving gender equality and empowerment of women. The International Telecommunication Union reported in 2020 that globally 57 percent of women use the internet, compared to 62 percent of men. The Web Society noted that men remain 21% more likely to be online than women, the number rising to 52 percent in the world's least developed countries. The Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) 2021 Mobile Gender Gap Report estimated the mobile gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa to be 37 percent, the highest in the world. Additionally, women and girls are underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields globally. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that less than a third of women globally work in scientific research and development and women make up only 17 percent of the workforce in the technology industry. The report noted that women are also under-represented in STEM-related industrial and academic leadership positions. In addition, research has shown that in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, there is a growing annual education financing deficit of almost US\$ 150 billion.

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic and climate crises, the war in Ukraine, Syria, and Somalia, and conflict situations in many other countries pose significant challenges and disruptions to education, innovation, and technological advancement. An example of this is the widespread and unprecedented disruption in learning at the height of COVID-19. As schools around the world closed to contain the spread of the virus and as more developed countries shifted learning to more sophisticated mediums aided by innovation and technology, millions of children around the world, especially in the Global South and East, stopped learning. Moreover, when schools reopened, a number of children did not return. A recent study by UNICEF showed that in Uganda, around 1 in 10 schoolchildren did not report back to school in January 2022 after schools had been closed for two years. In Malawi, the dropout rate among girls in secondary school increased from 6.4 percent to 9.5 percent between 2020 and 2021, and in Kenya, a survey of 4,000 adolescents aged 10-19 years found that 16 percent of girls and 8 percent of boys did not return when schools reopened.

The low use and access to innovation and technology and education by women globally have been linked to cultural, economic, and infrastructural barriers including affordability, digital skills, biases in technology development and deployment, online harassment, and limited time due to women being primary caregivers in their homes. For instance, Women First International Fund Partner in Malawi, TAWINA (Teams Advancing Women in Agriculture) asserts that public financing in the country has not prioritized resources and services that would increase rural women's and girls' access to and exploitation of digital technology and innovation opportunities. From their

experience, girls participating in their programs do not have access to technology, more so those in rural schools. Basic technology such as computers, the internet, and access to digitally aided teaching resources is minimal. TAWINA further notes exorbitant costs of data and underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure which further widens the digital gap and leads to “digital starvation” amongst income-poor communities. Indeed, the average cost of 1 gigabyte of data in the country is US\$ 2.42 and only 1 in 5 women own a mobile phone.

The internet offers valuable resources that can assist women in their personal and economic advancements. However, the lack of online safety discourages many women from engaging actively in the digital space. Research shows that women are twice as likely as men to have their intimate images shared without their consent. In addition, ensuring a safe virtual workspace, free from violence and harassment is important as many companies adopt hybrid workspaces with a virtual component. A safe online environment, free from violence and harassment, is crucial for advancing gender equality, and governments and employers must take the necessary steps to ensure that.

The 2022 Global Innovation Index report shows weak signs of technological progress, adoption, and innovation’s socioeconomic impact that are putting the future of innovation-driven growth at stake. Access to affordable energy both hydroelectricity and solar (renewable energy) remains a challenge in many parts of the world. It is estimated that 1 in 6 people do not have basic access to electricity impeding the use of innovation, technological advancement, and education. It is estimated that 90 million children in sub-Saharan Africa go to primary schools without electricity. Therefore, there is a very low chance that they will have access to computers or access to the internet. Women First International Fund Partner in Uganda, Community Women Enterprise Network (CWEN) has attributed several business losses among its members to energy poverty. CWEN asserts that several women entrepreneurs the organization works with have to take their phones as far as 5 kilometers to recharge, sometimes costing them business. Investment of at least US\$ 20 billion a year is needed to bring electricity to 600 million people in Africa.

Access to Internet infrastructure in Africa is still low leading to poor connection and exorbitant charges, which further widens the digital divide. According to the 2021 Development Cooperation Report, Africa’s fiber optic network was only 1.02 million kilometers in 2019. It is estimated that the terrestrial fiber optic network will never reach 30 percent of Africa’s rural population. Women First International Fund Partner in Tanzania, Her Initiative noted that connectivity is concentrated in the urban centers, resultantly the widening of the gender and rural-urban digital divide. From their experience, transitioning to online operations, e-commerce, and e-Learning at the height of the pandemic was difficult for their young women entrepreneurs. They attributed the difficulties of internet connection issues to poor infrastructure. Women First International Fund has supported the organization’s Panda digital platform which is used to train young women in entrepreneurship using online resources.

Internet shutdown including complete blocks of Internet connectivity by governments has increased in the recent past. Research has documented 931 shutdowns between 2016 and 2021 in 74 countries globally. It goes without saying that Internet shutdowns increase the digital divide and have negative economic implications across sectors, for example limiting financial transactions, commerce, and industry. Additionally, the lack of data protection for users of technology causes a lot of mistrust in governments leading to limited use. For example, in Manipur India, where the Women First International Fund Partner Rural Women Upliftment Society is located, Internet shutdowns caused massive economic losses to entrepreneurs, who relied on the internet.

Digital connectivity leads to educational opportunities for women which in turn provides a straightforward pathway for work in the digital sector for women. However, women continue to be at a disadvantage even with accessing the internet, one of the commonest forms of technology used in all facets of life today. Bridging the digital divide and ensuring a safe online environment are crucial for the empowerment of women and girls.

Therefore, we recommend that:

- Governments increase their national budget funding allocation toward education to align with existing global and regional commitments.
- Governments invest in the research and development of Science Technology and Innovations, with gender considerations.
- Global and national financing mechanisms direct innovation and technology toward rural women and girls living in poverty, and rural education and infrastructure.
- Governments connect all regions in their respective countries to the national electricity grid and or provide access to renewable energy sources.
- Governments enact favorable policies that promote technological advancement and innovation, for example discarding social media taxes and reducing internet costs.
- Governments institute a gendered approach to address online aggravation and crimes.
- Government take decisive steps to address violence and harassment in the workplace including virtual workspace by ratifying ILO Convention 190.
