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Statement submitted by MenEngage Global Alliance, Sonke Gender Justice Network, and Stichting CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, 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

Leveraging Digital Technologies to Address Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

Sonke Gender Justice, together with our partners including, Accountability Lab South Africa, Amref Health Africa, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, Human Rights Institute of South Africa and MenEngage Africa come together on this occasion of the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to make inputs under the Priority theme: Innovation and Technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women & girls.

Recognizing that over the past few years technology has become a powerful tool for social change. Internet connectivity has now become essential for the realization of many other rights, including the rights to freedom of association, assembly, to education, health, to full participation in social, cultural and political life and to socio-economic development. We acknowledge that technology and digital tools can play an essential role in achieving gender equality. The digital space presents a host of opportunities that can be harnessed to educate and empower women and girls. The digital space has also served as an important conduit for supporting the coordination and access to information for women and girls across the world during periods of COVID-19 related lockdown, when in-person meetings were not possible.

However, on a global scale, the gender digital divide is hampering progress and Africa continues to lag far behind. The internet gap is largest particularly in developing countries, where girls and women struggle to afford technology and internet access when compared to boys and men. With this digital divide, inequalities that women and girls face is further exacerbated and there is a need to close this divide while ensuring that girls are safe both online and offline. Currently only 54% of women now use mobile internet, with around 300 million fewer women having access than men. Women are also 20% less likely than men to own a smartphone. Equally of concern is while the dominant use and consumption of social media lies with women and girls, ownership and innovation remain the preserve of men. This is largely influenced by existing harmful social norms and practices that impact on women and girls educational and career choices, resulting in fewer numbers working in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). There is more work that needs to be done to bridge the gender digital divide and ensure that young people, women, and girls are fully empowered, not only as users, but as creators of digital content.

We welcome this particular focus on innovation and technological change, as we recognize that more and more young people today often use online media to access information about sexuality and reproductive health in a non-judgmental, confidential, and free of any coercion. The COVID 19 pandemic has shown us that technology can be a viable alternative to fill in the information gap when the usual physical channels are inaccessible or are laden with stigma. Mobile phones are highly efficient and cost-effective channels of communication and engagement with young people. Prior to the pandemic and where curricula was progressive, some young people accessed comprehensive sexuality education at school. However, with schools closed during the period of lockdowns and isolation, young people used digital platforms to access lifesaving information, necessary to make eclectic decisions about their bodies. Therefore, it has become imperative for investments to be made to ensure adolescent girls and young women have access to the necessary technological platforms. This is also evidence that technology can be effectively used to deliver information and services to people in a simple and accessible manner.

Among the most promising and exciting new approaches are self- and user-initiated interventions through digital health. These interventions have the potential

to increase choice, eliminate bias, ensure privacy and confidentiality when accessible and affordable, as well as opportunities for individuals to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health and general health care. Digital applications have also been developed to tackle issues ranging from delivering vital health information to pregnant women and girls to reporting instances of sexual and gender-based violence. It must be noted however, that digital solutions are only effective if they are accessible by all women and girls and are complemented by robust physical health delivery systems.

Technology can also be an influential tool for women and girls to become activists and lead change on issues that affect them. Social media platforms, as we have seen with the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements allow activists to organize actions around shared causes and provide access to wider audiences. Without equal access to technology and the internet, girls and women are unable to equally participate in our increasing and existing digital spaces. Such lack of access results in holding back girls and women by impacting on their ability to speak out and campaign on issues that affect them. It is further acknowledged that while online spaces can provide a platform for women's voices and stories to be shared, they can also leave women and girls vulnerable to new forms of harm through cyber-violence and marginalization. UN Women reports suggest that 73 percent of women have been exposed to some form of violence online thus necessitating the obligations of states to adopt safeguards against such harm. This is also in line with the 2013 Commission on the Status of Women outcomes recommending States to not only support the development and use of digital technologies and social media as a resource for the empowerment of women and girls, but to also develop mechanisms to combat the use of these technologies and social media to perpetrate violence against women.

The widening digital divide between urban and rural women demonstrated by little [if none at all] internet usage among women in remote and rural areas means they get left behind. As numerous aspects of our daily lives are increasingly affected by digitization, the inability to access digital technologies will result in further widening the gender equality gap. Women and girls will continue to be excluded from employment, access to financial, healthcare, and other basic services. We must harness the power of technology and use innovative solutions to extend our scope and impact to ensure inclusivity and to deliver information and access to services that will enable girls make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Women and girls in both rural and urban settings must have equal access to learning relevant technical skills and digital tools. And as the world changes, technology and access to the internet should not be barriers but rather pathways to achieving gender equality.

Recommendations:

1. We call on governments, especially those in low- and middle-income countries to prioritize investments in education and to create a digital world that is accessible, safe for all and ensures a future in which every girl can realize their full potential.
2. We call on governments to develop, adopt and strengthen policies aimed at reducing gender gaps in digital inclusion. Inclusive policies must effectively promote useful and meaningful content for women via digital platforms to increase access and use of basic services.
3. Governments must promote the education and advancement of women and girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields through scholarships, training programs and learnerships/internships.

4. Prevailing socio-cultural norms and gender transformative norms must be duly considered when developing interventions aimed at addressing digital exclusion of women, for instance learning opportunities for building digital literacy can be provided both inside and outside of the classroom environment.

Endorsed by:
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