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Statement submitted by AGE Platform Europe, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen, International Federation on Ageing, International Longevity Center Global Alliance, International Longevity Centre Canada, National Council of Women of Canada, The Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women/La fédération canadienne des femmes de carrières commerciales et professionnelles, and Widows Rights 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

The National Council of Women of Canada and our sister organizations firmly believe that access to quality education through all levels, supported by relevant life skills throughout the life course, is both a fundamental and a human right to ensuring the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the digital age. Digital technologies can be powerful tools for girls and women to advocate for and lead change within their communities and beyond. Studies have shown that access to, and the ability to understand and use technologies, can positively impact women's abilities to express their ideas and options, connect with peers, and unlock education and career opportunities. The gender digital divide reflects the overall discrimination faced by women and girls.

Women and girls form the majority of the estimated 3.7 billion unconnected people in the world. The pandemic led to digital technology being the only lifeline to essential services, health-care information, livelihoods, or to exercising rights. The digital exclusion became dramatic. Women, who make up more than half of the 1.7 billion people financially excluded from the digital economy, could have less access to cash transfer programs in times of crisis. Issues of, access to, use and misuse of digital technologies should be guided by international human rights norms and principles, especially equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, participation, and the provision of effective remedies.

While women account for a little over 50% of the world population, they represent 70% world's poor, due to continued sexism and discrimination in the home and labour market, which reduces equal opportunities for women. If the world is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, digital technology across society is of vital importance. Women comprise more than 40 per cent of university graduates in science, which needs to be translated into women and girls' strong participation in the technology sectors, and that continues to remain remarkably low. The numbers in these fields need to be translated into women's and girls' strong participation in STEM.

The world is becoming increasingly a digital hub, revealing both the vast promises and dangers of digital technologies. To benefit from digital technologies and address the challenges, in 2018–2019 the United Nations Secretary-General convened a High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation. In 2020, based on this Panel's report, while following further multi-stakeholder consultations, the Secretary-General issued the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation which includes the commitment to connect all people to the Internet. All countries must move forward in this direction. Yet not all countries around the world have the luxury of economic capacity, infrastructure, and connectivity affordability.

Connectivity should not be considered a luxury, but a lifeline for sustaining one's family, for remote jobs, learning, keeping in touch, and accessing essential services. Additionally, among those already connected, many women face barriers such as lack of skills or access to appropriate equipment, which prevents them from fully utilising the potential of connectivity. It is very important to be noted that, without the involvement of girls and women in technology, the kinds of products, services, and platforms being created would not address the needs of half the population.

Now is the time to take bold steps to ensure that all girls and women enjoy the digital revolution. Nevertheless, moving forward, leaving no one behind, is paramount to achieving gender equality and mitigating the economic impacts and digital divide.

It must be gender-centred and must promote all women in all areas: the marginalised, vulnerable, disabled, older women, and illiterate women and girls. It must be noted that older women are the girls of yesterday, without equal opportunities and rights. The digital gender divide is particularly pronounced among older women. Less exposure to new technologies and skills due to time spent out of the paid labour force in order to carry out caregiving responsibilities can also lead to a lack of confidence in using digital devices. Older women also tend to be less financially literate than men. These education gaps create challenges for older women to be socially included, independent and able to enjoy access to services.

Moreover, older women face barriers in the areas of education, training, and lifelong learning, such as accessibility, insufficient digital infrastructure and skills, affordability, age limits for enrolment or having to balance caregiving responsibilities. Their ability to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities is also limited by gender educational gaps accumulated over life. This is further aggravated by ageist attitudes, for example as employers often regard older women “as non-profitable investments for education and vocational training.

Today in the age of digital technology, we move equally forward on the path to gender equality. Furthermore, for people with disabilities, particularly women and girls with invisible disabilities, information and communication technology has become another barrier in the context of the pandemic and ongoing issues related to it. When designing and implementing programs and policies, all disabilities must be considered.

The National Council of Women of Canada and our sister organizations are supporting those Member States committed to the Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education through the UNESCO ReWirEd campaign, as it offers three concrete principled actions: centre on the most marginalized, expand investments in free and high-quality digital education content, and move education to digital spaces through pedagogical innovation and change. Additionally, the National Council of Women of Canada is urging member states to ensure that digital technologies be guided by international human rights norms and principles, especially equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, participation, and the provision of effective remedies. Responses, policies and programs implementation must be guided and based on human rights approaches that place all people at the centre of the solutions, without any distinction of gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, or disability.
