



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 December 2021

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-sixth session

14–25 March 2022

**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 Centre for Social Research, 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

As the digital spaces, social media, online platforms become the new public place; they mirror all challenges of the real/offline society. This gender-unequal world that we occupy is what is reflected back to us by the online world as well. Women should ideally have equal access to all of the economic opportunity, education and social connection that the Internet provides, but this is far from reality.

Digital rights of women are a manifestation of their constitutional Legal Rights including freedom of speech, right to equal pay and right to education in the online environment. With the increased online participation of women, their involvement in political and public life has been on a rise; however, to enable them to take full advantage of the information and communication technologies (ICT) it is imperative to tackle the barriers such as inequality of access and technology based violence against women. Per the data of International Telecommunication Union, the proportion of women using the internet globally is only 48 per cent as compared to 58 per cent for men while in relative terms; the global internet gender gap is 17 per cent.

The persistent digital divide in society has led to more challenges than opportunities when it comes to digitizing services, especially with India's stark digital divide between urban and rural India. Although a majority of India's population (about 66 per cent) lives in rural areas, internet density (calculated as internet subscribers per 100 people in the population) is 25.3. This is a low number, since urban areas have a 97.9 internet density, with only 34 per cent of the country's population living in urban spaces. These gaps are further complicated with gender in the mix (as well as location, income, education, language, and age).

South Asia has the widest mobile gender gap in the world, where women are 28 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile and 58 per cent less likely to use mobile internet. In countries such as India, China and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the problem of access is not based solely on class – women from wealthy households also face barriers of access. These barriers manifest in the inability to send a simple SMS, and lower levels of technical literacy amongst women, safety concerns and patriarchal norms which restrict women's participation online.

Growing gender-based cyber hate and parental concerns about the safety of their daughters seriously impact the ability and willingness of women to express themselves freely in the digital space. This is a cause of concern as it has caused the underrepresentation of women on social media platforms leading to not just undermining the inclusive nature of the internet space but also the loss of a host of social and political opportunities for their empowerment and prosperity.

For the past 40 years, the Centre for Social Research has been exerting efforts dedicated to creating a violence-free, gender-just society through social research, capacity building and advocacy and the core of our work in the last decade has been to make the online spaces safe, secure and inclusive for the youth, especially the women and girls of India and the world. And at the CSW 66 we would like to bring together a panel of global experts and moderate a discussion on the topic of Gender-Equal Safe Online Spaces.

The team at the Centre for Social Research has worked closely and trained more than 200,000 youth and children on issues of online safety and digital wellbeing, with great support from our partners like Facebook India. Our advocacy efforts to influence policy are also well known. A discussion with an international panel will bring in a fresh perspective and strengthen our knowledge base. A global alliance in this way ensures that safety practices in India are in sync with the rest of the world.

The future of free expressions and a liberal and progressive internet space depends on the decisions we make today. In this regard, fearless exercise of digital rights by women and use of technology for their social and economic development is critical to preserve the free and open nature of the internet. The challenges around safety, accessibility and persisting digital divide needs immediate and strategic attention and it is the collaborative universal efforts that can help tackle this challenge in an effective and sustainable manner.
