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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**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 Young Diplomats of Canada, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### **Addressing the unique risks faced by women, girls, and gender-diverse people in technology policies**

Innovation and technological change within the digital age can uplift under-represented communities, connect unique ideas and individuals, and support global development. However, women, children, people of colour, and Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by not having quality and sustained access to technology and are more susceptible to risks attached to the digital age.

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women, girls, and gender-diverse people in the context of innovation, technological change and education in the digital age will require policies and programmes that understand and address their unique risks. It is important to consider the following:

In order to succeed in an increasingly digital world, it is essential for all individuals to have free and equal access to digital technologies. Currently, women, girls, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups do not benefit equally from digital innovations. Various biases and barriers prevent these groups from accessing and fully adopting digital technologies. These barriers can relate to a lack of infrastructure, high costs of internet connectivity, scarce resources, or prevalent social norms around the suitability of digital tools for girls. Bridging this digital divide is essential to realizing the rights of everyone.

Where women, girls, and other marginalized communities do have access to digital technologies, we know that they are at a heightened risk of online harassment and abuse. Violence against women on digital platforms is emblematic of long-standing systemic discrimination and societal inequality. Violence online is particularly harmful to individuals who embody intersecting identities leading to heightened discrimination. The prevalence of violence online can also deter women and girls from using digital tools.

As more people around the world are engaging online, investing in digital literacy is an essential priority. The skills to navigate misinformation and gender-based violence are necessary to succeed online. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics education also ensures that children develop innovative skills and can participate in our increasingly digital world.

While distance and virtual learning have supported the democratization of education, many individuals are left behind in the digital age. In particular, women, girls, and other marginalized groups are disproportionately disadvantaged. Due to systemic gender stereotypes and biases, boys and girls have had different experiences in accessing and using technology. Women and girls have not been adequately supported to develop the digital skills required to harness the full potential of online learning. Further, education being delivered virtually and from home increases the burden of domestic care work often placed on women and girls and subsequently poses barriers to equal and quality participation. Moreover, women, girls, gender diverse, and Two-Spirit people who live in rural and Indigenous communities are disproportionately denied access to the internet and technology due to the lack of stable, reliable, and affordable connectivity required to access online learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how colonial policies have disadvantaged remote Indigenous communities in Canada with regard to basic infrastructure such as high-speed internet. Statistics show that 97% of urban households have access to the internet compared to 37% of rural communities and 24% of Indigenous communities. These statistics exemplify the anti-Indigenous

racism perpetuated by Canada's lack of action. The digital divide between Indigenous and rural communities can harm women, girls and gender-diverse peoples' abilities to access education, employment, and physical or mental health services.

Digital innovation is reshaping the landscape of work. The digital skills gap in education leads to a pipeline problem where fewer women are represented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers. This reduces the ability of marginalized groups to benefit from the digital revolution and furthers the gender divide. Hybrid-work and work from home policies can empower women's career progression; however, they can also reinforce gendered care-taking stereotypes at the disadvantage of women.

Addressing inequality and empowering women and girls requires understanding the full scale of challenges and barriers they face in society. However, gender data for many global indicators of equality are either missing or incomplete. The result is poor policies which fail to address the needs of girls and other marginalized groups.

Digital algorithms and artificial intelligence have the ability to reinforce biases and oppressive social inequalities. Individuals coding these programmes can reinforce their own biases into these technologies, compounding existing gender inequality. As our world becomes increasingly digital, with greater reliance on artificial intelligence we must ensure that gendered biases and inequality are not perpetuated in our digital tools.

In order to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women, girls, and gender-diverse people in the digital age, policies and programmes must:

- (a) Ensure the security and proper collection of gender data that is proportional and representative of society;
- (b) Increase the use of and equal access to technology for educational needs & programming to ensure girls can routinely complete their schoolwork at home or in the classroom;
- (c) Improve policies surrounding cyberbullying and create programs that educate both young boys, girls, and gender-diverse people on cyber hygiene, how to safely use technology, and protect personal information;
- (d) Enhance access to internet and information communication technology by 2030 to increase transformational opportunities for women, girls, and gender-diverse people across geographical dimensions;
- (e) Strengthen policies and functional programs to protect women, girls, and gender-diverse people from gender-based violence – online and offline, and all forms of discrimination;
- (f) Recognize and investigate the unique risks faced by the emergence of technologies that can be used to advance adversity and increased threats against women, such as immersive reality and artificial intelligence;
- (g) Support, amplify, and protect the voices of women, girls, and gender-diverse people utilizing social media to leverage their voices;
- (h) Assure online spaces are safe for women, girls, and gender diverse people to have the ability to engage online without censorship, or the threat or reality of violence or negative consequences;
- (i) Fulfill the resolution request of the Assembly of First Nations to improve access to high-speed internet in remote Indigenous communities;
- (j) Support national policies for infrastructural development to ensure equal and quality access to information communications systems;

(k) Develop and implement action plans that support girls' pursuit of science, technology, engineering and mathematics education and careers; and

(l) Work with the government, private sector, and civil society to close the digital divide.

Without considering and implementing the aforementioned points, those most at risk will continue to be impacted in the future. If we aim to achieve gender equality and empower all women, girls, and gender-diverse people in the context of the digital age through the creation of policies and programmes, we must understand the unique risks young women face.

\* This statement is endorsed by the International Relations Students' Association of McGill University and Results Educational Fund, Inc.-ECOSOC-accredited organizations.

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