



## Economic and Social Council

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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 Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Rutgers, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Innovation and new technologies have become ubiquitous in all aspects of life, opening up new public and private spaces for education, vocational training, and work as well as significantly accelerating impact in vital fields like health, justice and broader social services. However, women and girls remain the vast majority of those who are forcibly disconnected due to intersecting cultural, economic, social and political barriers commonly referred to as gender digital divides. It is therefore important to reflect on the lived realities of all women and girls in the digital age in order to establish an environment that is conducive to gender equality through innovation, technological change and education.

We would like to take the present statement as an opportunity to address the following pressing issues before your committee:

- Gender digital divides persist and are even more rampant with the COVID-19 pandemic and the global recession which continue to result in unequal opportunities for education and empowerment between those in developed countries and those in developing countries. Hence, leveraging innovation and technological change in education need to be accompanied by a holistic approach involving skills development among learners in local languages with special attention to marginalised groups and to gender disparities.
- In circumstances where poverty is having such a profound impact on quality of life as well as life expectancy, the opportunities for distance education and training of women and girls can play a crucial role in the prevention of poverty and in dismantling urban-rural disparities which take a toll on women's and girls' lives and livelihoods.
- Equally important is the opportunity for distance learning for people displaced through civil war and conflict, cross-border migrations, or climate change, amongst other factors. In these contexts, distance education may be the only opportunity that displaced peoples have to further their education. Any potential regulation should bear in mind this value that the internet offers the state's obligation to realise the right to education.
- While we welcome the link between the right to education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we would like to emphasise that development must occur within a rights framework, and that simply achieving access to education on its own is insufficient to meet the rights obligations of states. Efforts to expand internet access for education and learning need to respect important civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression and access to information, and the right to privacy.
- Gender-based violence that is committed, abetted or aggravated through the use of information and communication technologies and in online spaces is part of the continuum of violence against women and girls and is a significant barrier to women's and girls' ability to take advantage of the opportunities that innovation and technological change provide for the full realisation of women's and girl's human rights including sexual and reproductive health and rights and development.
- Women and girls in all their diversity have been disproportionately affected by the strains on health systems and social systems brought on by this pandemic. Yet, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services and related information online remains globally restricted, often censored and sometimes even completely shut down. Furthermore, women and girls have to wade through dangerous disinformation campaigns to access timely and fact-based

content on sexual and reproductive health and rights topics in spite of the high demand. States and internet intermediaries have the obligation to ensure that open, safe, and reliable sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information providers are locally and meaningfully available, and accessible.

- Several laws provide for access to sexual and reproductive health services, but they do not include or acknowledge the aspect of privacy. The toll of privacy violations and confidentiality breaches have severe, wide-ranging and adverse repercussions on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, a reality that we call on states to change by introducing gender-sensitive data protection laws and frameworks.
- Access to comprehensive sexuality education in line with the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education with proper monitoring mechanism is imperative especially for advancing better health outcomes and overall well-being of young women and girls.
- Content related to women's sexuality and bodily autonomy has been the target of arbitrary blocking and deliberate censorship, such as through shadow and search banning. This growing trend of restrictions runs counter to the realisation of women's right to expression, information and opinion which are key to the fulfilment of bodily integrity and autonomy rights, education, civil and political engagement and individual self-determination. Internet intermediaries including internet and mobile service providers must be called upon to develop corporate policies, practices and tools that respect women's and girls' rights and condemn online practices that are harmful to women and girls.
- Information and communications technologies for gender equality is still largely untapped from a research and policy perspective, more funding is needed to explore the impacts of information and communications technologies on gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment.

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