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peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, 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

The Young Women's Alliance, part of the National Alliance of Women's Organisations unites, acts for and amplifies young people's voices. We actively promote the inclusion of young women in the women's rights agenda, so that their voices are brought to the attention of relevant governments and organisations. We are submitting the following on behalf of young women in the United Kingdom.

Our prime concern is a greater protection for all women and girls on online platforms to prevent abuse and harassment. In the Beijing Platform for Action, a key priority is ending violence against women which in the digital age has taken on a widened perspective, with over half of girls saying that online harassment is more common than street harassment. The Council of Europe have reported girls as a vulnerable group that are affected by specific forms of online violence. Their data shows that 62 per cent of women aged 16-34 have experienced online abuse, with women being 27 times more likely to experience online harassment than men.

Women with intersecting identities such as women of colour, migrant women, women with disabilities, or women with a public persona, including politicians, journalists, or activists, are more at risk. In the European Union 58.2 per cent of women members of parliament have been the target of online sexist attacks (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). This greatly threatens democratic processes by ensuring certain voices are silenced and underrepresented in public life. The potential of online spaces to promote freedom of expression and women's rights is under threat from online abuse which hinders progress towards gender equality.

Online harassment creates a culture of fear that has long-term effects on victims and discourages participation of whole groups in conversation.

Victims see the impact on their families, jobs, and health; according to Amnesty International UK data 55 per cent of women who have experienced online abuse say they have experienced anxiety, panic attacks and stress. A 2021 European Union study estimates the overall costs of cyber harassment and stalking against women add €49-€89.3 billion per year in healthcare, legal, labour costs, and costs associated with reduced quality of life. Additionally, women have reported modifying their behaviour online, self-censoring and adopting defensive mechanisms to avoid online abuse.

Online gender-based violence can worsen offline violence as the availability of personal information and weak privacy security makes it easy to find victims' home address, workplace, or phone numbers.

This situation has worsened due to the COVID-19 shift towards education on eLearning platforms with the use of secondary software to monitor learners' device activities and recording learners through their webcam. These practices can enable 'doxxing', the collection and distribution of individuals' private information online. This threat makes accessing online education too risky for women already in vulnerable situations. Moreover, a study conducted by Privacy International across 16 countries of the Global South found that surveillance can perpetuate oppression.

The digital gender divide has been increasing as technology becomes more dominant, especially in the workplace. The European Commission has estimated that over 90% of professional jobs have a digital component. The Sustainable Development Goals referenced the potential for technology to promote the empowerment of women as the digital revolution provides real potential to improve outcomes for women and girls but is not without risk of perpetuating existing patterns of inequality. There are far-reaching consequences for women's social inclusion if they are not adequately trained and equally able to access jobs in technology as their male counterparts. Despite the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calling

for the full and equal participation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, women in the United Kingdom remain heavily underrepresented across these sectors accounting for only 19 per cent according to the Tech Nation report. This difference intensifies with executive positions; PwC UK have found that only 5 per cent of leadership positions are held by women. Furthermore, UN Women research shows that the rate of attrition is high with women leaving jobs at twice the rate of men.

Despite the recent push for girls to pursue science-related subjects in school, PwC UK reports that only 3 per cent of female students see a career in technology as their first-choice. The hurdles posed by a lack of mentorship and female role models cannot be underestimated and they create a negative feedback loop which amplifies inherent gender bias and the socio-cultural perception that tech is for boys. Without senior female figures to take inspiration from, girls are more likely to internalise harmful stereotypes shaped by power relations in the workplace, creating a pipeline problem in attracting women into the tech market and leadership. There is also a lack of financial support to help women access the necessary quality education for this career path, which creates additional barriers to entry for women from marginalised backgrounds.

To counter the above, we call on Member States to implement tougher legislation to prevent all forms of online violence, explicitly the gender disparity in social media abuse.

We call on the international community to unite to set minimum standards in combating gendered cyber violence, such as the European Commission 2022 proposal for a directive including the criminalisation of certain forms of online gender-based violence. We call upon domestic legislators to follow this example and centre the voices of all women and girls to ensure progress is gender-sensitive and transformative.

We call for criminalisation of capturing or sharing biometric data without informed consent, and its commercial sale. Legislation needs to include specific measures to address online harms against those with multiple protected characteristics, including women in political and public life. Member States must effectively implement recommendations outlined in the Istanbul and Budapest Conventions, which can help address online gender-based violence through co-ordinated policies, prevention, protection and prosecution.

We call on Member States to encourage all technology platforms to adopt international frameworks on human rights, such as the Council of Europe Co-operation with Companies, which enables companies and governments to develop human-rights based policies in digital technology. Parties should insist on the availability of granular data on any form of online violence and provide more transparency about their policies on dehumanising language. Platforms should be encouraged to actively seek and promote cultural change with regards to the attitudes and behaviours perpetuated on their platforms that lead to online gender-based violence and exacerbate existing structural inequalities. Users should be able to access immediate reporting mechanisms both on service providers' and law enforcement platforms. Technology companies should be encouraged to do more to identify repeat offenders and make it harder for banned accounts to resurface.

Member States should promote inclusive policies for the technology sector, bringing a gender perspective into the design of products and governance of their corporations. Women should be involved in co-creation of products and policies to ensure their concerns are met.

We call for Member States to provide quality digital education from an early age within their national curricula to combat the digital divide and teach online safety. Curricula should include digital citizenship defined as the ability to engage positively, critically and responsibly in the digital environment, and practise social participation that is respectful of human rights. Men and boys must be active partners in combating harmful stereotypes. Programmes for the empowerment and positive representation of women and girls online should be widespread. Recognising the importance of mentorship schemes, such as InnovateHer and Coding Black Females in the United Kingdom, should be incorporated into a multi-layered holistic approach to encourage girls to pursue careers in technology.

The concerns and calls for actions presented in this report are not exclusive of many other relevant concerns we have. However, they highlight the immediate threats and provide solutions which we urge all Member States to adhere to in order to support innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

This statement is supported by members of our organization including Associated Country Women of the World, Mother's Union, Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland, Widows Rights International, Zonta International.
