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entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Oxfam International, 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

Oxfam believes that the right to education is fundamental to gender equality and the realization of rights of women, girls and gender diverse people. We are however, deeply concerned about the gendered impacts of austerity measures that will grip 85 per cent of the world's population by 2023 (Eurodad, 2022), including the cuts in financing of public education which will hinder girls' access to education and the full realization of their rights. While Oxfam believes that technological innovation has the potential of supporting both instruction and educational governance, we remain alert to the reality of digital inequalities within and between countries, between genders as well as the possibility of increased fees, privatization of education, lack of digital protection for girls, thereby further locking out the most vulnerable from their right to education.

COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis that the world is witnessing at the moment has increased inequality worldwide, as the poorest and most vulnerable people were hit hardest by both the disease and its profound economic impacts. Yet most of the world's governments failed to take major concrete steps to mitigate this dangerous rise in inequality. Despite widespread destitution caused by the pandemic, half of the countries actually cut social protection spending, and 70% cut education spending (CRI, 2022).

The gap between girls and boys when it comes to school enrollment continues to be major, and worrying. Data consistently shows, especially in low- and middle-income countries, that girls from poor families are the children most likely to be (and remain) out of school. The cost of education is one of the main barriers for access. Fees of any kind at pre-primary, primary and secondary level exclude the poorest, and especially girls. While technology can play a major role in advancing education, the question of affordability, access, and digital literacy and safety remains a big one, particularly for families across the world that were struggling to enrol their girls in formal education to start with. Crucially, austerity measures, public funding cuts, and privatization severely limit the goal of universal education. Universal access to free, quality education is core to the fight against inequality, and gender inequality in particular. Access to free public services is a key redistributive method; any cuts will disproportionately impact those who most depend on them and who have no option to pay for private alternatives.

Education as a public service

Education is a fundamental human right and the opportunity to enjoy the right to education without discrimination is an integral part of international human rights law. Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women provides for the obligation of member states to ensure equal rights for girls to access education at all educational levels, experience the same quality of education and address prevailing negative gender stereotypes. They have the right to receive gender-transformative education, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and leadership to challenge financial, social and political dynamics that uphold gender inequality and one which works towards equal educational access, participation, completion and outcomes for all.

Despite it, even before the pandemic, globally, three-quarters of children of primary age who have never set foot in schools were girls (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020). The pandemic has put decades of progress in education into doubt. While addressing the potential intergenerational impact of the pandemic calls for increased focus on strengthening the public education system, the recent Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality report suggests that instead 70 per

cent of countries cut education spending during this period. Spending on education is at high risk given that 85 per cent of the world's population is expected to experience austerity. Cutting public services has been a frequent consequence of such reforms.

Addressing old and new challenges to education fundamentally entails delivering the basics including the availability of professionally qualified, trained and motivated teachers, safe schools, appropriate gender-sensitive curriculum and removal of financial barriers (school fees) so that girls can access and make the most of schooling (Education Community of Practice and Influencing, 2021). Instead, a legacy of the pandemic was the expansion of online and distance education which while useful in the short run, has had an unequal impact on girls' education.

Technology could have a significant potential role in supporting both instruction and educational governance. However, it is also critical to recognize that pedagogically online learning comes with several disadvantages including low engagement and completion rates; education technology leaders themselves admit that values like empathy, teamwork and other life skills can be learnt only in a school, and not by being tethered to a digital device. The insistence on innovation often carries with it risks pertaining to privatization or a heavy dependence on education technology (digital learning software) instead of ensuring the key investments needed in the fundamentals necessary for public education.

Recommendations:

1. Expand (not reduce) funding for public schools to address both the legacy of the unfinished education agenda and to address the impact of the pandemic.
2. Make a deliberate effort to invest in and build gender transformative education systems that respond to and address gender stereotyped views.
3. Take a more critical view of the use of technology that recognizes both its strengths and weaknesses.
4. Reject privatization and commercialization of education, including through the increased use of technology.

Addressing digital inequalities for women and girls

It is crucial to address concerns around access to digital technologies, especially when looking at the use of technology in education, a fundamental right. Digital access remains unequal between genders and classes. In the context of the digital gender divide, digital inequalities relate to the potential obstacles and differential options available to marginalized populations, especially women, when attempting to access, use, and learn about digital technologies. In this sense, one's identity markers and presenting gender affect one's opportunities for educational advancement, socioeconomic empowerment, and other benefits of having equal access to digital tech, including the internet (Mariscal et al. 2019). In most countries, digital technologies are widening the digital gender gap in these countries (ITU 2017; Deursen and Helsper 2015).

Despite information and communications technology for development initiatives, such as those led by UN Women and EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age to promote online gender parity, "hurdles to access, affordability, lack of education as well as inherent biases and sociocultural norms curtail women and girls' ability to benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital transformation" (Chetty et al. 2018). Thus, the digital gender divide persists and does not appear to be narrowing.

Today, the internet is both a reality and a necessity. Within the context of an intersectional approach, internet access and use must be made available equitably to everyone and to a degree that allows digital empowerment for all people within their specific context. Safety and education—in support of increasing women’s digital literacy and use—are understood as key elements in digital empowerment for marginalized populations and as a necessary step toward gender parity online (World Wide Web Foundation 2015; Glezou 2019; Chetty et al. 2018).

In low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike, legal policies regulating the inclusion of marginalized populations have also been shown to help bridge the digital gender gap (Chetty et al. 2018; see the sections “Governance” and “Security and digital civic spaces” in this report). For technology to be inclusive, risks such as data privacy and cyber violence, must be addressed.

Recommendations:

1. The integration of technology in education must be looked at from an intersectional lens, taking into consideration barriers to access for girls and low- and middle-income countries.
2. Laws and policies must address risks that are more eminent for women and girls, including data privacy and cyber violence.
3. Technology must not widen the gap between genders when it comes to accessing education. The integration of technology should not come with an additional cost to the education bill.

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Oxfam believes that the right to education for girls in rural areas also secures their livelihood and can advance gender equality. Land is a source of wealth, important for the social and economic wellbeing of people, and critical to guarantee sustainable livelihood options and opportunities including access to education. In practice, this means that with secure rights over land comes the certainty required for investment and productivity, ensuring food security, increasing economic opportunities, access to social security safety nets, education and healthcare. Insecure land rights put communities at risk of being forcefully evicted or having to move constantly which lead to disruptions to continued access to education.

Secure land rights helps realise other rights such as right to adequate housing, the right to an adequate standard of living, right to food, the right to health, the right to education, gender equality and equity, and protection from violence and injury or abuse, right to social security, highest attainable standards of physical and mental health, right to take part in cultural life.

Recommendations:

1. Government and relevant stakeholders need to invest in the capacity of rural women leaders in the governance of their land and territories to ensure feminist leadership to transform systemic and structural inequality in accessing land and natural resources.
2. Empower women and girls in developing countries with adequate resources and capacities to lead and be at the centre of the access agenda.