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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 Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Edmund Rice International Limited, Feminist Majority Foundation, Girls Learn International, Inc (GLI), Global G.L.O.W., Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Loreto Generalate, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council of Jewish Women, International Presentation Association, Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto), Passionists International, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, The Grail, The Salvation Army, and Zonta International, 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

Small incremental steps have not given us the world we want. The Sustainable Development Goals lag far behind in producing necessary outcomes, particularly for girls. Gender equality is essential to achieving the SDGs, but more importantly to ensuring girls' fundamental human rights. Yet as UN Women currently reports, gender disparities are worsening, and without investment, it is estimated that gender equality will take another 300 years to achieve.

We recognize that social innovations and technology have the potential to break trends and increase awareness, access, and the availability of opportunities – but only if they benefit all equally. We know this is not the case. Gender Snapshots 2022, produced by UN Women and the Department of Social and Economic Affairs, notes that discriminatory norms and violence sideline women and girls from fully entering the digital world. A large gender gap continues in the area of technology and innovation. Women are underrepresented in industries, academia, information and technology, yet it is known that integrating women and girls and other marginalized groups into technology fields leads to more creative solutions, more innovation to meet women's and girls' needs, and promotes gender equality.

The Working Group on Girls calls for change. Girls from all economic, geographic, racial, ethnic and ability backgrounds must be given equal access to quality education and safe spaces to learn so as to empower economic independence and decision-making. Quality education must include digital, financial and political literacy. It's content must be gender-neutral and non-discriminatory.

The importance of digital literacy, reliable electronic devices, internet access and the ways they impact how girls interact in the world, educate themselves, and participate in political discourse, must be recognized. Closing the digital divide is crucial to their human rights. Girls must be able to connect with leaders, representatives, legal services, and a broad array of institutions to ensure their rights are met. This is particularly important in conflict areas or in otherwise vulnerable communities where human rights are frequently violated and there is scant access to justice.

Closing the digital divide is essential to girls' empowerment as agents of their lives. Girls use the internet for information, learning, connecting with community groups and services, and advocating for girls' rights. They are also major advocates and change agents in climate action movements, honoring the voices, knowledge and skills of Indigenous Peoples working to prevent and mitigate climate degradation. According to the 10 May 2022 Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls entitled: Girls' and Young Women's Activism, girls increasing use of the internet provides them with crucial opportunities for making their voices heard. Ensuring access without discrimination is key to enabling their activism. It is also a key component of quality education in a world that is increasingly digitized, and in which many girls have been left behind, particularly in rural, remote, or less privileged areas. Disruptions in their education have left lasting impacts. Worldwide, nearly 130 million girls are not currently enrolled in formal education.

The ability to access opportunities for quality education, ongoing learning and access to services is an essential life skill. We know that each additional year of schooling yields a 20% increase in future income, greatly impacting poverty reduction, maternal health, child mortality and violence against women and girls. Girls call on Member States and local governments to recognize access to digital technology as a fundamental human right, and provide it in a manner that is readily available, accessible and affordable for all. The internet must be universalized as an essential commodity.

New technology also brings possibilities for misuse and abuse, creating new human rights challenges. Internet use must be safe and harassment-free through enforcement of practical regulations making it easier to report abusive content and behavior. As the Girls' and Young Women's Activism report notes, digital technologies may be used to blackmail, control, surveil, coerce, humiliate or objectify girl activists, and may include the use of pornographic content or death threats. In certain countries, girl activists' very presence on social media may constitute great risk to their personal integrity. The responsibility for monitoring online harassment, bullying and other dangers should not be left to girls, parents and guardians. States, private companies and all stakeholders must take appropriate measures to ensure and enforce online access and safety for all.

States must also address the gender gap in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), areas in which women represent only 20% of professionals. Girls report having to overcome many hurdles to enroll in STEM classes. While they note growing acceptance of women in technology-based careers overall, discouraging attitudes toward girls and technology and continuing stereotypes re: girls' capability persist. Some families see STEM education as a waste of money for girls. Girls have to break stereotypes and overcome oppression to gain access to STEM fields. States must ensure that girls have equal access to quality education that develops their skills and equips them for the future. Recognizing technological and scientific achievements of women, and providing opportunities for mentorship would also help advance girls' participation and future livelihoods.

Girls from rural and remote areas, Indigenous and other marginalized groups must receive particular focus in addressing the digital divide. Limited or lack of access, electricity, affordability of devices and connectivity costs – these are all infrastructure issues that must be addressed by Member States in order to ensure all girls' rights to equal education, information, and participation in political life. Girls rely on the implementation of the SDGs in order to flourish as doors open to their education and empowerment. We know that this has a 'multiplier effect' when girls have equal opportunities to learn and make decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods, reducing chances of early marriage and poverty.

Girls note the positive implications of efforts by girl activists to utilize technology in reaching out to girls around the world. In 2021, in collaboration with UN Women, the Working Group on Girls' hosted global girl-led conversation circles in productive dialogue around Generation Equality Action Coalition Themes to encourage girls' participation and leadership in the political processes at the local, national and global levels. In areas where internet access was limited or not available, girls' organizations were provided a toolkit for hosting local conversations. Their feedback was then incorporated with feedback from the on-line groups, thus practicing diverse ways of inclusion and bridging the digital gap.

Clara Scholl's (former WGG Girl Advocate) article in MS. Magazine – "A Year After the Taliban Took Over, Leadership Programs in Afghanistan Still Raise Up Girls", 7/21/2022, highlights how local NGOs focusing on leadership development have been a lifeline in the face of Taliban occupation, providing safe spaces for girls to learn and empower each other, and to share information to girls outside the program. A 17 year old Afghan girl described the NGO as their home, a place where girls are listened to and help each other, giving them energy and power to act, to learn what their rights are and how to raise their voices. (She has been part of this program since kindergarten.) Their goal is to become active and powerful women. They refuse to give up hope, every day seeking alternatives.

Girls make creative use of virtual space in their communities, using online gathering spaces to share food, dance, music, culture, farming methods, and

collectively collaborate to address issues in their communities. Girls engage in outreach on gender equality via podcasts, programs on YouTube, girls' leadership, learning and advocacy groups, and include girls in remote areas via letter-writing and mentoring programs by older girls and women in their communities, encouraging them to speak out about issues that affect them.

The Working Group on Girls calls all Member States to actively listen to the voices and contributions of girls, include them in consultations and decision-making at all levels, empower them with the tools to build their capacities, and ensure their right to play an equal and active role in collective life in an increasingly digital world.

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