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peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Plan International, Inc., 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.

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Statement

COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of societies and economies, and the adoption of digital technologies at an unprecedented pace across sectors, including advances in information and communications technology which have presented new and positive opportunities for girls and young women worldwide.

The Internet, social media and other digital apps and platforms increasingly provide important spaces for learning, interaction, and activism, as well as a platform for fostering relationships (WeProtect, 2021). In two reports, Free to be Online (2020) and The Truth Gap (2021), Plan International found that girls are enthusiastic about the opportunities and greater access that technology provides for speaking out, sharing information, communicating with family and friends, recreation and accessing education, news, and current affairs.

Yet, while digital technologies hold strong potential to empower girls and women politically, economically, and socially, significant barriers exist to ensure they are not left behind. In all areas of their lives, girls, who are at the intersection of age and gender, face additional challenges driven by entrenched social and gender norms as well as discriminatory policies, with those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination most severely impacted.

Gender divide in digital access, digital literacy, and information and communications technology education and occupations hinders girls and young women's access to the benefits and opportunities that digital technologies and spaces present. Where access exists, so does increased risk of violence, abuse, harassment, and other harmful practices including hate speech and misinformation.

Gender transformative actions, policies and programmes with the meaningful inclusion and participation of girls and young women at their heart, that address the digital gender divide, online gender-based violence, and gender gap and bias in technology design, and create inclusive digital economies and innovation ecosystems are critical to ensuring that technology and innovation advance gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

"Girls are being left out in my community; they have not been exposed to digital opportunities and gadgets or even how to use them. Boys are exposed to digital opportunities from childhood. A ten-year-old boy can already handle technical problems… I'm older and I don't know how." (Paula, Uganda)

Across the world, women and girls increasingly face gender-based barriers that prevent them from accessing, using, and designing technology and digital tools at the same level as boys and men. Girls are, on average, less likely than men to own a mobile phone, use mobile data, or use social media apps. There is also a stark gender disparity in Internet access, which limits the ability of girls to access information, participate in public life, and benefit from many opportunities that the digital environment and digital economy can bring.

The digital gender divide is driven by economic gender inequalities; inequalities in education and digital literacy and skills; gender norms and stereotypes discouraging girls and women from accessing technology and digital environments; and concerns over safety and security. Unaffordable digital devices and high cost and low quality of internet connection are also key barriers. Girls, especially in developing countries, are deprived of educational and technological opportunities to build their digital literacy and information and communications technology skills, which are essential for economic empowerment in an increasingly digitised economy.

Globally, 18 per cent of girls in tertiary education are pursuing science, technology, engineering or mathemathic degrees, compared to 35 per cent of boys (UNICEF, 2020), and at 15 years old, 0.5 per cent of girls wish to become information and communications technology professionals, compared to 5 per cent of boys (OECD, 2019). In information and communications technology occupations, Big Tech companies self-report that women make up only an average of 24 per cent of tech roles, and 29.6 per cent of leadership roles.

This gender gap, in turn, impedes the creation of technologies and innovation that respond to the needs of women and girls.

Technology is not gender neutral. The design process requires choices about which - data, metadata and other- sources to use; the functions, behaviours, appearance, and the needs that products address. Biases held and assumptions made by designers, and biases inherent in their data sources and design process are reflected in those outputs.

The gender gap and diversity crisis in the technology sector; absence of age- and gender responsive approaches in technology design; and failure of the private sector to identify, assess, and prevent adverse impacts on the rights of girls and women that may arise from the design or use of their technology products and services, including a lack of accountability, are three issues that must be addressed to ensure technology and innovation contribute to advancing gender equality for girls and women in all their diversity:

Digital and technology products are predominantly designed by men without substantive input from girls and women, and without sufficient consideration of gender-, age- and diversity related risks. As a result, products may not accommodate the needs of diverse groups, can reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities, and risk being deployed for malign purposes harmful to girls and women.

"I remember during the lockdown….Because of the online teaching method which was adopted. I could not complete quizzes due to poor network. It affected my grades and I became so depressed." (Hiqmat, Ghana)

The pandemic also spurred tremendous investment and growth in digital education. While digitalisation of education presents significant benefits for ensuring continuity of education in times of crisis it also carries immense challenges. Switching to online learning solutions has caused learning loss and further exacerbated existing inequalities in contexts where meaningful access to the Internet and digital devices is still a challenge for many students and teachers. The effectiveness of digital education is also hindered by low digital literacy and skills of students, teachers, and parents, lack of conducive study spaces at homes, and lack of guidance and support for parents and teachers, including for maintaining students' engagement.

Additionally, significant violations of students' data protection and privacy have been identified in many online learning platforms: students' online behaviours have been tracked, including outside of such platforms for non-educational purposes, and their data is shared with third parties without their consent (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

It is essential that technological, pedagogical, skills-related prerequisites for effective, inclusive and quality digital education are ensured, and that adequate safeguards are introduced to mitigate the risks, including equitable access, privacy, safety, that can be detrimental to the rights of girls and young women. Digitalisation of education cannot be an end goal by itself, but a tool for realising the right to education for all.

"A friend of mine grew up with a father who had not allowed her access to mobile phone or social media. He didn't want her to get in contact with any guy or post anything about herself online. He invested fear in her instead of guiding her how to maintain safety online." (Lynn, Lebanon)

As girls increasingly access digital spaces, the risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse also increase. Of the 14,000 girls and adolescents interviewed, more than half had been harassed, mostly sexual in nature, and abused on social media (Plan International, 2020).

Existing laws and policies do not adequately recognize or address online harassment, abuse or other forms of violence. Cyberbullying, cyberstalking, unsolicited sending of obscene images, doxxing are not illegal in many jurisdictions. As a result, girls and women who report cases to the police frequently face inaction and are unable to access relevant support systems. Cases are not investigated, survivors are left with no redress or access to justice, and perpetrators maintain their actions and enjoy impunity. Social media platforms' own enforcement mechanisms also prove ineffective: Plan International has documented that 35 per cent of girls already reported or blocked their harassers but abuse persists due to serious flaws in corporate reporting and enforcement mechanisms, and algorithms and human moderators frequently making erroneous review decisions.

Action must be taken to keep girls safe online through updating and reforming legislative frameworks, putting in place effective enforcement mechanisms, and improving knowledge and capacities of law enforcement and other first responders. We need to ensure that survivors have the support they need including access to justice and accountability.

The following recommendations have been shaped by the voices and experiences of girls and young women.

At the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we call on Member States to:

- Adopt gender transformative policies to bridge the digital gender divide and ensure that girls and women in all their diversity have equal opportunities to safely and meaningfully access, use, lead, and design technology and innovation;

- Institutionalise and ensure meaningful and safe participation of girls, young women in all their diversity in policy-making processes concerning innovation, technology, online safety, as well as other decisions shaping their digital experiences and interactions and affecting their lives;

- Provide universal access to affordable and meaningful internet for all girls and women, including those in low-income or rural areas, through improving infrastructure, extending network coverage, reducing the cost of internet, and other measures to address the connectivity gap between genders, countries, and regions within countries;

- Take measures to ensure equal access to affordable digital devices, such as smartphones, laptops, computers, for all girls and women;

- Expand digital literacy and skills of girls and young women through delivering up-to-date digital literacy and skills trainings, including for marginalised groups, such as rural communities and people with disabilities, that are an enabler of employment, economic empowerment, political participation, activism, accessing knowledge and information, and exercising their rights in an increasingly digital world;

- Increase educational enrolment of girls and young women in information and communications technology disciplines to enable them to gain advanced knowledge and skills to become information and communications technology professionals and leaders so that they can actively participate in increasingly digitised economies as creators and designers of technologies, not only as users and consumers;

- Treat digital education a tool for realising right to education for all, not an end goal by itself; ensure digitalization of education is accompanied by adequate safeguards to mitigate risks, including equitable access, privacy, data protection, safety, that can be detrimental to the rights of girls and young women;

- Identify and address gaps in laws and policy frameworks that do not adequately recognise and address new technology-facilitated forms of gender-based violence, such as online harassment, abuse, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, unsolicited sending of obscene images, doxxing; bring legal clarity to the definitions and handling of, all forms of online violence and clarify the responsibilities of internet intermediaries, platforms, regulatory authorities, and law enforcement in address it, ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms and access to justice for victims;

- Provide children, young people, and parents with gender transformative educational programmes on digital citizenship, digital safety and security, digital literacy, and other relevant subjects to support children and young people learn their rights in the digital environment (including privacy and security), understand wide range of online risks (including abuse, harassment, scams, false information, identity theft, among others) to avoid them turning into harms, and navigate safely, critically, and responsibly in digital spaces;

- Recommit to increase investments towards feminist technology and innovation to support women's leadership as innovators and better respond to women and girls' most pressing needs;

- Strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure that technology companies and other corporations respect human rights, including the rights of girls and women, in the design and deployment of information and communications technology-based technologies, digital products and services; undertake age and gender responsive human rights due diligence, in compliance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; and identify and prevent rights impacts for girls and women that may arise from their products, services, and business activities.

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