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

Statement submitted by Women’s Board Educational Cooperation Society, 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

Access to the digital world is an important step towards empowering women in the modern age. It makes it easier for women to confidently take part in the digital world. In this way women can achieve their desired goal by skilfully and effectively using technology to transform business models to provide revenue and create value-generating opportunities for themselves.

But as technology continues to advance in modern society, there is a digital gender gap that has impacted negatively on women's livelihoods, health, and educational outcomes. According to the Bridging the Digital Divide report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD) in 2018: "Some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the mobile Internet. Women are under-represented in information and communications technology (ICT) jobs, top management and academic careers and, as shown in this report, men are four times more likely than women to be ICT specialists. At 15 years of age, on average, only 0.5% of girls wish to become ICT professionals, compared to 5% of boys. Women-owned start-ups receive 23% less funding and are 30% less likely to have a positive exit compared to male-owned businesses."

The United Nations recognizes the importance of closing the gender digital divide by reinforcing efforts and achieving SDG goal 5, which focuses on enhancing the use of enabling technology, particularly information and communications technology, to promote women's empowerment. As this existing digital gap continues to threaten women's access to the benefits of full participation in digital economies.

Women frequently find themselves in a vicious cycle whereby ongoing social norms and gender disparities obstruct their ability to advance in almost every sphere of life. This remains a huge challenge which causes even a greater digital divide in today's world of constant technological advancement and digital innovation. In some cultures, the internet is still seen as a threat to the established social order and viewed as unsafe for women and girls. In many emerging and developing economies, there are still other legal and cultural barriers that prevent women from having access to digital devices.

Inequality in education is yet another significant contributor to gender digital bias. According to International Telecommunications Union data from 2019, more than half of the world's women are offline and this is posing a huge effect on the world's digital economy. Many women remain likely to miss out on the exciting possibilities of the digital age due to lower levels of education and a lack of confidence.

Another issue with digitalization is online safety. Digital technology carries several risks, including those related to data security and privacy, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate photos, child sexual exploitation, and abuse, as well as online harassment from strangers. People of all genders, especially women and girls, are more likely to experience digital harm.

Bearing in mind the importance of digital technology and skill in empowering women, we at Women's Board Educational Cooperation Society continue to organize activities that equip girls and young women with digital knowledge and skills. Activities such as seminars, holiday programmes, bootcamps, community service projects take place in our projects across the country and they are geared towards leaving no girl behind in the digital space.

In 2015, one of our projects, Afara Leadership Centre, Lagos, created the Computer Resource Centre for girls in public schools who lack access to computer technology due to their poor economic background. The aim of the project was to

provide basic computer knowledge to secondary school girls especially in preparation for their computer-based examinations. The Centre continues to empower students who have little or no access to computer education to develop themselves from introductory computer to coding sessions. Since inception, 794 girls have benefitted from the Computer Resource Centre.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre engaged undergraduate girls in a seminar tagged 'Women in Tech'. The seminar was anchored by a software developer from Andela who helped the girls develop personal interest and readiness to take advantage of the possibilities in the tech industry, as there is a space for everyone. Upon resumption to physical activities another seminar tagged "Break'in" into Tech' took place in 2022. It was facilitated by two female Microsoft software engineers who never had a foundation in technology. They inspired participants with their journey into the tech world and encouraged them to take advantage of their smartphones and laptops in order to launch themselves into digital technology.

Also, Wavecrest Study Centre, Lagos organized a "Learn-to-Code" course for senior secondary school girls in December 2019. This one-week exercise was coordinated by three facilitators from an ICT company called Track-IT. In early 2022, ten secondary school girls of age nine to sixteen years benefited from a mini-Avatar animation class using the Zepeto app. During their 2022 summer holiday programme, a 3D generalist and animation professional taught digital skills and animations to sixteen girls. They learnt basic storytelling, elements of storytelling using 3D animation and life action. At the end of the programme the girls were able to make their own simple stories and film using animation.

One of our projects in Enugu carried out a community service project in August 2022 in the Obiagu community for girls who just concluded their junior secondary school. The one-month long project was an introduction to basic computer training with an emphasis on Microsoft Word typing skills. Laptops were provided by the Centre for the use of the young girls to achieve this. By the end of the programme, the girls who previously had no experience with practical computer classes were more comfortable with navigating the keys on a keyboard with proper hand placement for typing using Mavis Beacon and typing master software on the laptops.

Our hospitality schools have functional ICT rooms equipped with computer systems, laptops and internet access and the lecturers who teach computer studies do so with revised curriculum to boost the studies of the students. The students are often given quizzes, classwork and assignments which require online and offline research for individual or group presentations. Since we empower women to become entrepreneurs, many of our students have been able to use social media to promote their hospitality skills, sell products, expand their network and engage in free online courses too.

We continue to position our study centres to foster more collaboration and partnership with digital technology companies in order to promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics among the girls who participate in our activities. This way, we contribute to promoting women's empowerment in the digital world and to reducing social norms and gender disparity affecting digitalization to the barest minimum.

In order to achieve digital gender empowerment for women and girls we would like to join our voice to others canvassing for the promotion of affordable, secure, and open broadband internet access for women. In addition, it is important to create safe online spaces for women to encourage female digital literacy, careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, web-based female entrepreneurship, and financial empowerment for women through cutting-edge digital finance tools and e-government.

Government officials and policy experts must ensure that gender balance and equal protection are incorporated into the legal frameworks for online safety, security, and data privacy. Organizations that support women and girls can collaborate with governments and legislators to create these frameworks in order to guarantee that women's voices are heard. It will be advantageous if digitalization is seen as a means of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment as well as a crucial element for the creation of societies in which both men and women can meaningfully participate and contribute. Therefore, it is essential that women take part in and gain from digitalization, from design to application, as opposed to being excluded.
