



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

**Sixty-seventh session**

6–17 March 2023

**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 ACT Alliance - Action by Churches Together, 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.



## Statement

ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together is a coalition of more than 140 churches and church-related organisations working with long-term development, advocacy and humanitarian assistance in over 125 countries. ACT Alliance is committed to gender justice and identity as common values and inalienable human rights, and seeks to counter the backlashes against women's rights, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

ACT Alliance welcomes the priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women. We call on all Member States to increase their efforts to close the digital gender gaps, invest in solutions that facilitates women's participation and financial inclusion, and address online violence against women and girls in all their diversity. As a faith actor, we recognise the developmental challenges that face the world and the potential role of technology and innovation to tackle systemic inequalities. This requires investments in women and girls' inclusive and equitable access to internet and digital equipment, and their involvement in design, creation, innovation of digital tools, as well as adopting laws and regulations that ensure safety and security of women and girls. It also requires work with social norms, laws and policies that prevents women and girls' full participation and equal opportunities in the economic and public sphere.

### Closing the Digital Gender Divide

Closing the digital gender divide is essential for reaching gender equality and sustainable development. The digital gender divide is not only a technology issue: it is an economic, social and cultural issue that requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral and coherent approach in addressing structural factors. Digital transformation is increasingly driving business and the world of work. While there was an upsurge in the use of the internet in 2020 with 4.9 billion internet users from 4.1 billion in 2019, the Mobile Gender Gap Report indicates that about 393 million women do not have a mobile phone, among which 74 million are in sub-Saharan Africa.

The unequal participation in the digital age is further excluding the most marginalised, who are often women and girls. UN Women highlights that the exclusion of women, people with disability, those living in poverty and rural communities, means that they are unable to utilise the opportunities presented within the new economy. As education, work, public service delivery, and access to markets shifted to online spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide reinforced global and national inequalities. A lack of digital tools and infrastructure resulted in distinct inequalities between the global north/south, due to restricted access to the internet and digital equipment, like smart phones, computers, and software.

Research shows that women use technological solutions to a lesser degree than men and even less women utilise more advanced digital applications. This is a result of social and cultural norms, lack of affordability, literacy and technological infrastructure, particularly in rural communities. Women face barriers to education in Information Communications and Technology, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Most developers of technological solutions do not involve women in the development, design, testing and roll out of new innovations. Lack of women and other under-represented groups in positions of technological development is impeding their access and use of technology. Without decisive action, the digital divide will be the new face of inequality.

## Innovation

Access to internet and digital solutions provide opportunities to promote the fulfilment of women's human rights and economic empowerment, for example, through opening avenues for engaging with the public, expanding access to education and information about women's human rights and comprehensive sexuality education. Faith actors have long campaigned against gender-based violence, and in this work digital solutions have proved to be important tools to communicate with communities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As many women, children and persons of diverse sexual orientation and identity have been trapped in their homes with the perpetrators, civil society have found new ways of supporting survivors of gender-based violence. Innovative solutions have, for instance, enabled survivors to report violence to the police via video link, making it possible to report such crimes while in secure shelters. Faith actors, women's organisations and other civil society actors have also used digital solutions for information campaigns about gender-based violence and women's human rights, as well as established support groups.

Technology has the potential to facilitate financial inclusion for the most excluded populations. World Bank showed that over 1.7 billion people were unbanked in 2017, with 56% being women. The growth of technology has enabled financial inclusion through mobile money services and the digitalisation of self-help groups. For instance, in Uganda the digitalisation of Voluntary Savings and Loan Associations has enabled local communities, mostly women who are unserved by formal financial institutions, to solve challenges related to liquidity, access formal financial services and have digital financial footprints. Technological solutions are used to address intersecting global challenges, for example, climate and gender justice. In Bali, women entrepreneurs have managed to mitigate the recurring problem of flooding due to enormous amounts of waste ending up in streams and rivers, by establishing a waste bank. The waste bank uses a mobile application that enable women from the community to register and sell collected waste, which is processed and sold to companies that recycle plastic waste to use for their products.

The centres of development and power have the potential to shift with technological advancement but can also entrench inequality. Local and contextual solutions are needed in the development of new technologies. Social innovations that seek to meet social needs, create relationships and form new collaborations are crucial in the sphere of innovation, as they aim to increase empowerment, inclusion and wellbeing. Herein lies the forging of innovative collaborations with all stakeholders in society, including faith-based actors who serve local communities and have their trust, ear and influence.

## Online gender-based violence and civic space

Innovation and technological advancement have increased women's participation in the public space. However, digital technologies are a double-edged sword, that both enable and restrict civic space. In recent years, we have seen how physical violence have been transferred or extended to online spaces exposing women and girls in all their diversity to a cycle of violence. Violence against women offline and online is a manifestation of systemic marginalisation of women throughout society. Women human rights defenders and women political actors are particularly targeted.

When the centres of development and power shift from government to private sector, it remains crucial to ensure accountability to human rights. Digitalisation makes it easier for states to block people's rights to information, censor opinions, spy on and repress its citizens, with a disproportionate impact on the rights of women and other marginalised groups. Moreover, with the development of new digital tools, such

as biometric surveillance and with little/no accountability for private tech corporations, human rights are constantly under threat. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights endorsed in 2011 and the 2019 United Nations Gender Guidance on Business and Human Rights have been important steps in reinforcing that human rights frameworks and principles apply to business entities but have their limitations.

#### Recommendations to Member States

Remove the barriers to women's access and use of digital technologies, with a focus on availability, affordability, safety and security of digital technologies, services and connectivity.

Ensure the integration of inclusive and gender-responsive approaches in the design, use and development of digital technologies, taking into account intersectional factors of exclusion.

Promote the inclusion of women and girls in all their diversity in the digital transformation, not only as users but also as creators of technology, and facilitate their advancement to visible leadership and decision-making roles.

Invest in the development of digital skills and digital literacy of girls and women in education.

Address violence against women and girls in digital space. Protect and support those that are targeted online, in particular women human rights defenders including faith leaders speaking out for gender justice.

Adopt and enforce laws that prevent and protect women and girls in all their diversity from all forms of online violence and safeguard the online privacy of women and girls in all their diversity.

Work with faith actors as strategic partners to address gender inequalities and harmful social norms that restrict women and girls from equally participating in the digital sphere.

Ensure that ethical frameworks for corporations involved in digital technologies are in line with international human rights law obligations, including principles of equality and non-discrimination.