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Statement submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, 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

The Role of Spirituality in the Digital Age for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls

Digital technology has become integrated into all facets of our lives, the way we work, socialize, learn, entertain ourselves, and lead. As reflected in the 2018 report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it states that bridging the digital gender divide, there are many hurdles facing women in becoming more digitally adapted. What is the critical inner development needed so that women and girls can confidently be part of this digital transformation? What is digital technology offering as a new way of leading that women can pioneer in these critical times?

The digital economy holds the promise of opportunity for the advancement of girls and women if we can equalize access, connection, breakthrough stereotypes and overcome cultural and traditional limitations. While policies can be created, the implementation of these policies requires a recognition of the value of women's equal participation in the digital world and an encouragement of their true potential. Transformation of deep-rooted mindsets and attitudes is a spiritual process, which becomes a foundation for women to claim their agency and become equal partners in decision making. This level of transformation begins by awakening a higher awareness of one's self.

Girls need spiritual support

A young girl has received a narrative through her culture, traditions, family and environment. This influences her definition of herself and becomes an identity that confines her to what is expected of her and how best to fit into the mould given. There are layers of this identity, which are passed on to her from generations. Education offers a new perspective on possibilities for a young girl to explore, but the courage and will to redefine herself and step into a new way of being, expanding her capacity is an inward process. When she is nurtured by a spiritual education, to re-create an identity of self, she awakens an innate capacity of self-respect, determination, courage, creativity and inner power. One's sense of identity becomes the basis of self-worth and self-value. This deeper understanding unleashes a potential for learning, being innovative in the face of challenges and thinking beyond limits.

Every girl child needs to know, she has a right to every opportunity and that she is equally capable. When self-belief shifts, when the narrative given to every child change from limitation to possibility the capacity unfolds and flourishes. Drawing on the example of Katherine Johnson, an African American mathematician whose calculations of orbital mechanics as a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) employee in 1962 led to the success of the first and subsequent U.S. crewed spaceflights. Katherine's story is a story for every child to know that irrespective of the gender-based and racial discrimination she faced, she was confident in her skill as a mathematician. Through Katherine's example we observe that when a woman has a deep recognition of her talents, a deeper sense of her own self-worth and she lives by it, it gives her the courage, determination, and perseverance to go beyond barriers that society places on her. This inner strengthening will give young girls the motivation to explore and seek out opportunities regardless of stereotypes and cultural limitations such as in careers in digital technology.

Girls need companies to take an ethical stand

Whilst the digital world offers many opportunities, it does also bring with it many challenges. Young people tend to live in a virtual world, where the self is a virtual persona, and the allure of popularity and virtual success can put tremendous pressure on them to project unrealistic images of themselves which they compare with others constantly. This phenomenon of social comparison, which is when people assess their own value in relation to the attractiveness, wealth and success of others, can lead to severe mental health issues.

Where there isn't a deep sense of self-worth, young girls become vulnerable to getting addicted to this virtual world and her emotions are easily influenced by public opinions and comments which can have devastating effects. Studies have shown that this addiction to social media has effects on concentration span, distancing oneself from the real world and from family relationships hence an inability to have meaningful relationships and show empathy, leading to anxiety, depression and isolation. This has also led to cyber-bullying, higher suicide rates and an increase in women and girls being trafficked. Technology is a tool and how we use this tool is vitally important. Unless the individual has a strong foundation of spiritual principles and values that would define choices and guide the use of devices and apps, they are all too vulnerable to getting addicted and misled in the cyber world.

According to a Wall Street Journal article, 'Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show', dated September 14, 2021, where companies know the impact their apps and algorithms can have on young vulnerable girls, it would serve better if they could offer more empowering and positive influences to those using their platforms. A good example of this is Dove's new 'Reverse Selfie' film and campaign aimed to stop the damage retouching apps are having on girls' self-esteem. Companies must take an ethical position in supporting the development of young girls, who they see as their customer base.

Personal practices for inner development

The development of the inner being and the nurturing of the self cannot be under-estimated. To support this inner development, certain practices are essential. In this world of constant stimulation and information, one needs to create a timeout from the 'digital noise'. Daily, setting aside time for deeper relaxation, mindfulness and contemplation in silence ignites a new understanding of the strength that lies within. As one turns inwards, and holds the awareness of who they truly are, a being of consciousness filled with inner beauty, courage, and love; it allows for an experience of intrinsic peace and power so that one's thinking can be influenced by a greater wisdom. There is then the clarity and capacity to align one's decision-making with higher values more confidently.

When we realign our self-beliefs and attitudes, we are able to recognize our innate potential and utilise it innovatively. Innovative thinking is born from an uninfluenced, still and silent mind. One way to activate this inner power is meditation; and learning to access this sanctuary of quietness when faced with challenging decisions and pressures from the world around us.

Connecting to Source

Furthermore, the experience of unconditional and Divine love, is what ultimately sustains one's self-worth and self-respect. A connection with the Source establishes a sense of belonging and stability. It is this sacred connection which reaffirms the intrinsic goodness in one which then brings clarity of purpose, an inner

fulfilment and courage in actions. Actions stemming from this state of consciousness are naturally life-affirming and benevolent.

Our Interconnectedness

As we journey through on becoming more efficient in the digital world, we cannot just do it for ourselves but we must take all women with us. We must not forget that large percentages of women are "left behind", because of the lack of access to the internet and education on how to engage in the digital world. The digital divide is an ever-growing chasm which is deepening the gender and wealth gap. During the pandemic it became acutely apparent that in order to stay connected and have access to critical information we are dependent on digital technology, and that those who do not have access to it are 'left behind'. Like many organizations, the Brahma Kumaris used digital technology to keep members of the community informed, connected, and sustained through various virtual gatherings and programs. As the world was facing isolation, fear, and uncertainty, the Brahma Kumaris brought women globally together virtually to reaffirm their sense of self, identity, and confidence through a series of meditation workshops called "Strategies to Create a Peaceful Mind in Times of Uncertainty." In Latin America, an international team from the Brahma Kumaris was created to support meditation students across the region that did not know how to access and use various digital platforms and technology. To support the students, classes were created and small gatherings were held for women who were unable to connect virtually. Where data is expensive, shorter audio sessions were provided through WhatsApp on a daily basis. An effort was made so that no woman, irrespective of age or income, was left without support.

In addition, the Brahma Kumaris have consistently been holding live online courses globally for both women and men on how to use digital technology. Building on this initial digital intervention, the Brahma Kumaris aims to further enhance its offering of the inner development of the individual using digital technology, specifically for women.

Collaborative leadership

The digital space is an opportunity for women to pioneer a way of learning and leading that is co-creative and collaborative. Our world is complex and solutions need to be engineered across the spectrum of disciplines, cultures and regions. This quality of leadership is embedded in the principle that each individual matters and the solution to any challenge requires the creative resources and talents of everyone to work together for a common higher purpose where all can benefit. This enabling quality of leadership, requires one to have a deep inner security of one's own worth, and that there is a trust in the goodness that lies in the other, so that decisions taken are based on inclusivity and collaboration - building communities of greatness.

It is our belief that if we shift our awareness to awaken our innate qualities, we will be able to work with an attitude and vision of equality which will enable us to find innovative solutions to our global challenges. The principles which are rooted in the human spirit will ignite the will and the power to act from an awakened active conscience. Women play a pivotal role as change agents within communities and so it is vital for them to be critical players in the digital transformation of our world.

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