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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 Equality Now, 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

Equality Now, an international human rights organization and a steering committee member of several coalitions, including as the Secretariat of the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law and the Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition, and a co-founder of the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRI), calls on all member states at the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women to ensure that all women and girls enjoy the full benefits of a digitized society through the adoption of feminist informed universal digital rights that guarantee the fundamental rights of all people.

Digital technology and innovation provide infrastructure for the 21st century and an opportunity for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. However, the scope and scale of digital and internet connectivity, and affordable camera-ready technology, is also enabling online harm to occur at unprecedented levels across the world. Gender-based violence is taking new forms and being perpetrated and amplified online with impunity. Online sexual exploitation and abuse is rising at an alarming pace, and women and girls are disproportionately affected. Equality Now's report, *Ending Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Girls: A call for International Standards*, highlights growing forms such as image-based sexual abuse, live-streaming of sexual abuse and technology-enabled sex trafficking. UN Women's Brief on Online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19 notes that while there is still a lack of comprehensive global definition and data on online and ICT-facilitated violence, women are both disproportionately targeted and suffer serious consequences as a result. Further, the brief confirms that when women and girls do have access to the internet, they face online violence more often than men through a continuum of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence.

Online gender-based violence and other harms against women and girls do not occur in a vacuum. The internet reflects "real life". The patriarchy and misogyny that flourishes in our physical society are being replicated and exacerbated online. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are enabled and allowed to amplify age-old stereotypes and biases that feed misogyny and racial and religious divisions. A major concern is that AI and machine learning-powered predictive models are being used more often in decision-making across many areas of life, and recurrently lead to biased, unfair and discriminatory decisions for women and girls. Women are being denied jobs because AI and machine learning has concluded that men usually get them, and so disregard women's applications. AI is also taught gender biases in historical data and then propagating them into the automated decisions that insurers and banks are making. This has resulted in decisions where women pay more in premiums and receive less in claim settlements, or are denied credit.

The 2018 UN Human Rights Council Resolution on "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet" affirms that the same rights that people have offline must be protected online. Meaning that the human rights protected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further stipulated in international and regional law and instruments should be promoted, protected, and enjoyed in the digital realm. However, how existing human rights apply in the digital realm is a matter of debate, and one that requires a full analysis of the characteristics of the virtual experience, which differs from that of the physical world.

While there have been a number of initiatives, digital rights charters and declarations that are either being discussed or have been adopted at international, regional and national levels, their development and adoption has not been universal, and most digital charters are not legally binding. Equality Now and our partners,

therefore, call upon member states to work towards global conceptual clarity and consensus on what people's digital rights should look like across all areas of their interactions in the digital space. This would be achieved through adopting universal digital rights that will guarantee the rights of all people in the digital space. These universal rights would include the rights of all people to equality and freedom from discrimination in the digital space, including through AI and algorithmic biases, the protection from all forms of gender-based violence, and the protection of data that concerns them to ensure respect for their dignity, identity, and privacy.

We encourage member states at the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women to leverage the global momentum to address human rights and accountability in the digital realm, particularly the UN Secretary-General's commitment to adopt a Global Digital Compact to "outline shared principles for an open, free and secure, digital future for all". The adoption of universal digital rights will ensure equality for all women and girls in both physical and digital spaces and accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and the commitments that governments have made to Generation Equality.
