



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
29 November 2022

Original: English

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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 C-Fam, 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.



## Statement

In an age of rapid technological advancement, the lives of people around the world are changing quickly, which expands new opportunities for many, but also carries new risks and costs that must be considered. Some of these changes affect women and girls in specific ways and can either contribute to their equality or hold them back from reaching their potential and thriving. In the digital age, educational opportunities are expanding, especially for people living in rural or remote areas or people with disabilities, both of which can make standard classroom-based learning more difficult. However, spending excessive time in front of screens and being exposed to the unfiltered content available on the internet poses particular risks for young people, and as the technology changes rapidly, there is a need to rigorously monitor its effects on individuals, families, and broader society, with a special focus on children and youth.

Access to information and education, including through digital means, are not controversial in themselves, although gaps remain in the provision of reliable electricity and high-speed internet access to all who need it. However, while the technology used to deliver these services is content-neutral, there are laws and policies that regulate the handling of certain content that is recognized to be harmful, and the content of educational programs, including those provided digitally, is also subject to decision-making by a variety of stakeholders, including lawmakers, school systems, and, most importantly, parents, who have, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), “a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

One of the most controversial topics in education policy in international, national, and local contexts, is “comprehensive sexuality education” sometimes referred to as “CSE.” Some have claimed that a right to comprehensive sexuality education is recognized in such documents as the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome of the International Conference on Population and Development, or the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is simply not the case. While these documents emphasize the importance of education and make reference to education regarding matters of sexuality, the phrase “comprehensive sexuality education” is absent from all of them, and this is not a matter of coincidence, but rather, explicit rejection of the term by many UN member states. Similar opposition is seen in local communities around the world, where parents exercise their prior right to choose their children’s education—a right called “prior” in that it supersedes any negotiated outcome of UN member states.

Parents oppose comprehensive sexuality education for good reason. Guidance documents from UN agencies including UNESCO increasingly make clear that it is a vehicle for bypassing traditional, cultural, and religious values that parents may seek to impart, and directly indoctrinating young and vulnerable children with concepts that remain extremely politically controversial throughout much of the world, such as regarding abortion as a human right, gender as referring to something other than male and female within the context of society, and concepts of the family that bear no resemblance to the UDHR definition: “the natural and fundamental group unit of society” that is founded when a man and woman marry and may bear children. Furthermore, proponents of comprehensive sexuality education often frame it as a “right” whose fulfilment may require deliberate efforts to bypass parental objections, often by concealing its content from them, including by the use of digital technology.

The current UN agency-wide approach to sex-education, the “International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach” published by UNESCO in 2018, does not sufficiently emphasize risk-avoidance and

may even endanger children. UNESCO's own reviewers found less than 50% of surveyed programs had their intended protective effect on outcomes ranging from delay of sexual debut to limiting sexual partners. The guidance even admits there is no evidence curriculum-based sexuality education protects children from sexually transmitted infections.

For these reasons, we call on the Commission on the Status of Women to reject the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education and focus instead on the uncontroversial, yet unfinished, task of equipping families and schools with the basic utilities and infrastructure needed to support high quality education for all, especially those in remote or low-resource areas.

New technologies for disseminating information have the potential to help women and girls gain knowledge and opportunities, including by expanding opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment. Digital connectivity enables access to remote work and educational programs with greater time flexibility, creating the potential for new ways to balance work and family life, especially for women who do not seek to relinquish their caregiving priorities for the sake of employment outside the home.

However, just as these new technologies and faster digital connections can create opportunities for women's equality and advancement in society, and allow both men and women to prioritize family life while maintaining employment, there are also ways in which they can contribute to a more dangerous world for women and girls. Pornography, particularly violent pornography, is a global problem that only increases as our connection speeds and interaction with connected devices increases.

Much of the pornography that is accessed online is violent, and researchers have found that, overwhelmingly, that violence is perpetrated against women. One frequently-cited statistic says that 88 percent of the most popular pornography contains acts of physical aggression, and while some dispute this, they often argue that scenes in which aggressive acts are framed as consensual should not be described as violence.

The word "violence," traditionally understood as physical aggression, has taken on new meanings in recent years, as references to "digital" or "online" violence have proliferated, including in the UN system. In a space that relies on negotiated texts, words must still have meaning: if we are able to expand our understanding of violence to include online harassment and abuse, we must not narrow it to exclude physically aggressive acts like hitting and choking, which cause physical harm and prevent people from experiencing the highest attainable standard of health, even if such acts are framed as consensual.

This normalization of violence in pornography carries real costs to women and girls, and renders the world more unsafe for them, including in their most intimate relationships. Surveys from the United Kingdom found that more than a third of women had experienced unwanted physical aggression during sex, and a study of U.S. undergraduates found that over a quarter of women had experienced choking, which is particularly dangerous and can cause serious injury or death.

Exposure to violent pornography is linked to violent behavior, especially among young people, whose understanding and attitudes are still being formed. Some have argued that comprehensive sexuality education is the answer, and that in its absence, young people will use pornography to learn about sexuality. This is a false choice. The international community, and national governments, can do more to restrict violent pornography from being produced, disseminated, and made accessible to young people. But young people are not well served by being taught that all sexual behavior is equally valid as long as it is framed in terms of consent. The normalization

of violent and aggressive behavior, such as choking, in the context of intimate relationships, is leading to such behaviors being enacted on unwilling people—mostly women—based on the impression that such acts are welcome. This normalization is occurring through the pervasive availability and consumption of violent pornography, and is enabled by those who say that a consensual act cannot be called “violent.”

The technology that enables greater communication and dissemination of information carries great potential to improve the lives of everyone around the world, including women and girls. However, it can also make the world a more dangerous and violent place, depending on its regulation. To that end, care must be taken to ensure that parents can know and make decisions about what their children are accessing online, including in the context of education, and greater efforts must be undertaken to reduce the normalization of violence against women through extreme pornography.

Technology is a tool, and like any tool, it can be used for good or harmful purposes. We call upon the Commission on the Status of Women to use its influence to encourage world leaders to promote the best uses of digital technology, while limiting its potential for harm.

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