



## 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 European Women’s Lobby, 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

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest organisation of women's non-governmental organisations in the European Union (EU), comprising of over 2000 women's organisation expanding across 31 countries including EU Member States, accession countries and those part of the European Economic Area. We welcome the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Priority Theme of "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls", which needs immediate action to ensure that women and girls are not only part of the forward looking digitalised world but are actors and leaders of change in this area.

Whilst the transition to a digital Europe has been underway for a number of years, COVID-19 accelerated the 'digital revolution'. This period also highlighted many areas of concern relating to women and girls, notably, the gender digital divide, the absence of women in the design and leadership of the digital revolution (gender mainstreaming), the impact on women and girls in relation to the future of work and the accentuation of online violence against women and girls.

The EWL wishes to address these issues, in particular in the framework of the European Union.

Digitalisation has a clear impact on women's lives across Europe and worldwide. The EWL acknowledges that on the one hand, the process offers huge opportunities and can play a major role in women's economic empowerment and independence with new opportunities and work spaces opening up. Digitalisation is the integration of digital technologies into every aspect of societal life. The increasing prevalence and emphasis of the Internet in all aspects of our lives, from learning to demanding accountability from our government and international institutions, means that it is becoming part of the texture of our everyday social, political, economic, and cultural life.

However, on the other hand, digital technologies and the process of digitalising society raises significant concerns for women's equality: exclusion from the digital transformation perpetuates existing inequalities as well as bringing emerging challenges. The digital transformation has had an immediate impact on the labour market in terms of employment prospects and influence on working conditions. There is a digital gender (and intergeneration) gap: women (of all ages) and girls are not equally benefitting from the digital transformation and remain invisible as decision makers discuss how digitalisation will affect Europeans. There are also gender divides between women in rural (the CSW67 Review Theme) and urban areas in terms of connectivity which leads to inequalities of good internet connections and access. This issue must also be addressed.

The gender (and intergeneration) digital divide needs to be taken into account when granting access to information and initiating granting (funding) process. We call on all UN Member States to ensure that online tools will overcome structural barriers such as the lack of access to hardware and/or internet connexion. We call for all UN Member States to provide free accessible digital tools and to design simplified administrative procedures to ensure equality for women and girls and better integration of services.

In the EU, women constitute only 17% of the workforce in the 'digitalised' economy. Gender segregated labour markets reinforce gender stereotypes, roles and expectations. Women and girls must be at the forefront of digital design, in shaping the future of work as active agents of change. Technology and innovation are not gender neutral, they reinforce gender bias and stereotypes. It is therefore urgent that

educational curriculum is gender inclusive to ensure that girls are prepared and shaping future challenges, including online security.

The recent adoption by the EU of the Digital Service Act (DSA) fails to address women in the digital space, the absence of gender mainstreaming in this particular piece of legislation, which will shape the future of the digital economy for now and in the future, is a serious gap that needs to be addressed immediately. EU policies that are “digitally impacted” remain heavily driven by neoliberal capitalist concepts that all too often exclude a feminist perspective. Limiting the analysis to an increase of GDP without regard to women’s equal participation or how the process of digitalisation has and will impact women is a serious lacking and contrary to a feminist agenda. Women and girls, through greater investments in STEM studies for girls is paramount to shaping future generational leadership in the digital space.

With the devastating impacts of COVID-19, inequalities between women and men have deepened. Lockdown and isolation measures have created an enabling environment for abusers’ coercive control of victims and led to more incidents of physical, psychological and online sexual violence. The growing presence of and interactions in the online space have also increased violence women and girls face in the digital sphere.

As our lives have become more dependent upon the digital tools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now more urgent than ever to recognise that the online space maintains misogynist norms that continue to shape our digital environment. A holistic understanding is required in order to understand the lived realities for women in the online space.

A Europe fit for the Digital Age is a Europe that must ensure safe and equal access for all women and girls. Violence against women and girls in the digital space is a part of the continuum of violence against women and not a separate phenomenon. For the EWL it is clear that any action that causes psychological, emotional or physical harm to women and girls in the online sphere or facilitated by digital tools is violence against women and girls.

The EWL welcomes the European Commission proposal for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which addresses key forms of online violence and sexual exploitation. The EWL calls on the European Parliament and the Council to extend the scope of the proposal to ensure a comprehensive Directive that addresses all forms of sexual abuse (including sexual violence, rape, female genital mutilation, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, and forced pregnancy) and sexual and reproductive exploitation (including prostitution, pornography and surrogacy) that must be recognised as crimes and forms of violence against women that are often enticed through digital means.

To ensure all women in the EU wherever they live benefit from the same level of safety and protection, the EU must expand the list of EU crimes under Article 83(1) of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, to include “violence against women and girls” as a Eurocrime. As a severe violation of women’s rights, this crime severely undermines EU values and needs to be combatted on a common basis by all EU countries. In this same regard, the EWL calls on the Council to conclude the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention on combating and preventing violence against women and domestic violence in order to ensure that all male violence against women and girls in the EU is prevented, prosecuted and responded to with the best policies and protection measures. To this end, the EU should appoint a Coordinator to end violence against women and girls with national coordinating bodies per Member State and structured engagement with civil society organisations.

Online violence against women and threats to their rights remain pervasive. Participation free of harassment, violence and marginalisation is crucial to our democracy in which women are free to participate and lead.

In this regard, the EWL is very concerned by the war in Ukraine, subsequently the risk of violence that women and girls fleeing conflicts and travelling to or settling in the EU are at higher risk of being subjected to male violence and who are often enticed through digital means. On the way and in the temporary communities and reception centres, they face rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, from different perpetrators; they are forced to resort to prostitution in order to get access to food, housing or transport; they face domestic violence; girls are being sold for marriage or trafficked for sexual exploitation.

The EWL also calls for women's human rights response to protect women and girls from male violence and exploitation; gender-sensitive asylum policies and procedures to help women and girls to escape and denounce male violence and access to their full human rights. Specific measures are urgently needed to ensure that all refugee and asylum seeking women and girls are protected and have access to justice.

Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, provides an opportunity to reframe women's and girl's human rights in a virtual space to ensure that no woman or girl is left behind. It is crucial that all future legislation and policies on digital issues are gender sensitive and gender mainstreamed, and acts in unison with the proposal for a Directive on violence against women and domestic violence.

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