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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 Azad Foundation (India), and Let’s Breakthrough, non-governmental organizations 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

Azad Foundation (Azad) and Let's Breakthrough (Breakthrough) welcomes the theme of the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women on "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" in a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Breakthrough has been working in India for over 20 years, focusing on making violence against women unacceptable by challenging and flipping gendered social norms. Azad has been working since 2008 in India with a mission to enable women disadvantaged by gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, race, colour and sexuality to empower themselves with knowledge and skills to build a gender-just society and earn a livelihood with dignity in jobs and markets that have traditionally been closed to them.

This statement harmonises with critical areas addressed at the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action i.e., violence against women, education and training for women and girls, and women in power and decision making. This statement echoes with SDGs 5 and 4 as well. The statement targets "Enhance the use of technology, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women." It addresses the issue revolving around gender norms which reinforces gender-based discrimination. The focus of this statement is to create enabling environments to enhance access to digital resources, technology and skill education by women and girls.

Context

Globally as education systems pivoted to remote learning in the aftermath of the Covid-19, a joint report by UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union reported that two-thirds of the world's school-age children – 1.3 billion aged 3 to 17 years old – did not have internet connection at home. 52% of young women globally have experienced some form of digital harm, and 87% of them believe the problem is getting worse (Web Foundation 2020). Women are now 16% less likely than men to use mobile internet, which equates to 264 million fewer women than men using mobile internet.

In India in 2021, 26% of the total adult female population owned a smartphone versus 49% of adult men. Indian women are 21% less likely to use mobile internet than men (Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022). The National Family Health Survey 2019-21 report suggests that only 57.1% of male population and 33.3% of female population had ever used the internet, pointing to a gender gap of 24%. The National Statistical Office (2017-18) stated that across India, only one in ten households have a computer - desktop, laptop or tablet.

The lockdown in India has affected 158 million girls destroying their dreams of formal education and better lives. Policy Brief titled "Bridging the Digital Divide for Girls in India", states financial constraint is a key reason for lack of access. 84% of girls do not have money to spend on internet access. 16% of parents said their daughters had no knowledge of computers; 38% of the girls do not know how to use MS Word, Excel or PPT. 67% parents believe that having a mobile phone is a distraction and not healthy for adolescent girls.

Breakthrough India and Azad experienced that lack of privacy to participate uninterruptedly in virtual classes due to scarcity of space in homes, less time due to over-burden of unpaid care work, increased gender-based violence during the pandemic have played pivotal roles to decline women's and girls' access to virtual studies. In many families, particularly in marginalised communities, phones are a

luxury and digital education is a far-off probability. Many families have single phones which are controlled by men.

Breakthrough India conducted a rapid assessment to understand the gendered impact of Covid-19 and subsequent vaccine hesitancy witnessed in India. 62% respondents said that during the lockdown, girls' studies were affected more in comparison to boys. 10% students were not able to access technology to attend online classes; 11% despite attending online classes said they couldn't learn much. Azad found that in urban poor communities of Delhi, Jaipur, Chennai and Kolkata during Covid-19, 40% of young women community leaders didn't have access to the internet, and 90% adolescent girls had no access to mobile phones or any digital devices. Azad imparted skill education to women to drive E-vehicles. In many cities they faced challenges to charge the electric vehicles due to lack of charging stations.

Efforts to mitigate challenges:

1. Innovation to mitigate the digital divide- Mobile Library for ITI students launched by Quest Alliance: Mobile phones were made available to help women continue learning, complete assignments for ITIs and apply for jobs. They were lent free of charge for a month; a learn and return model. The cycle continued with the next batch of women-in-need through 100 sanitised phones in Delhi.
2. Azad provided mobile phones and internet costs to young women and girls in their communities and developed a blended curriculum to include them in virtual training. Also, as an outcome of Azad's advocacy, the Delhi Government initiated including women as bus drivers of electric buses and arranged charging infrastructure for them.
3. Initiating mobile phone libraries with 20 government ITIs across 7 Indian states, to help women with access issues. The idea was that women would use digital devices, the internet to learn and attend virtual stations, prepare resumes, join job portals, etc.

Recommendations

Recommendations to include young women and girls in digital education and skill training:

Digital education must be taken to every adolescent irrespective of location, social status and place.

Public investments to create an 'optic highway' so that more people can access efficient internet connection. Investment in appropriate low-tech, affordable and gender responsive educational methods

A Donation Library can be co-created so everyone contributes their old phone

Teachers need to be equipped to develop digital course contents and to reach out to students through phone calls, short videos and messages.

To provide psychosocial counselling for children and adolescents to manage fear, stress and other emotional vulnerabilities through phone calls, interactive messaging, and positive interaction.

Advocacy with government and industry for blended curriculum in skill building and access to new technology to young women.

Gender-just ecosystem to ensure family and community support towards girls' and women's access to education and skill training in digital space and/or with new technology.

Conclusion

As Covid-19 has entrenched gender-based inequalities with restrictions on education due to the digital gender divide, a multi-stakeholder approach is needed to address the existing gaps and challenges. We call on the international community to strongly advocate for setting up robust accountability mechanisms in the governance structures for implementing a gender equality agenda across all levels and sectors - education, health, livelihood, social security, etc. It is pertinent to centre voices, experience and issues of girls and women to every space, promoting an environment of equality, transforming homes, families, workplaces and communities to make a positive difference in the lives of millions of girls and women.
