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Statement submitted by Article 19 - International Centre Against Censorship, 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

ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression and the right to information. ARTICLE 19 believes that free speech and access to information are essential for the progression of women's rights, for women and girls to participate in public life and decision-making, and to speak out against discrimination and violence.

Around the world patriarchal systems and norms continue to oppress and suppress women's voices. In this statement, ARTICLE 19 focuses on the elimination of violence against women through the safety of women journalists and combatting online gender-based harassment and abuse; women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, through bridging the gender digital divide; and women's empowerment through the right to information.

Elimination of violence against women. Safety of women journalists

Women journalists play a pivotal role in pushing for open, transparent and diverse societies, and holding governments to account. Their journalism has been shown to generate social actions that strengthen citizen participation.

However, around the world women journalists are at increased risk of threats as a result of their journalistic activities and for simply being women. This includes from political leaders and other public officials. In response, women journalists often resort to self-censorship as a form of self-protection, ranging from the deactivation of their social media accounts, to withdrawing from the profession entirely, or switching their reporting topics. The way in which gender-specific threats are used to silence women journalists cannot be separated from the contexts of structural discrimination in which they occur. Women journalists are not able to fully enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and participation in public life, where impunity for human rights violations and abuses perpetrated against them is the norm.

For example, in Mexico, gender-based crimes against women journalists comprise a large part of those that occur with impunity. Based on ARTICLE 19's monitoring and tracking of cases in Mexico, attacks on women journalists almost doubled from 56 to 111 in the first half of 2020. Likewise, attacks during coverage of social movements or protests, including women's movements demanding justice, accounted for more than 16 per cent of attacks.

Gender-responsive approaches to tackling all threats to the safety of journalists is essential. States must ensure that national legal frameworks fully protect the right to freedom of expression, privacy, equality and non-discrimination in line with international human rights law and standards and develop comprehensive public policies that promote women's empowerment and gender equality, in collaboration with other key stakeholders, including the media and civil society.

Specifically, States should adopt a gender-responsive approach in the design and implementation of national protection mechanisms for journalists, including risk analyses and the provision of protection measures for attacks against women journalists, with particular attention to women experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Additionally, States must take all necessary steps to end impunity for violence against women journalists, preventing attacks from happening and ensuring all attacks are impartially and effectively investigated in accordance with international human rights law and standards, including exhausting all lines of enquiry that connect perpetrators with the journalists' work.

Addressing online gender-based harassment and abuse

In recent years, digital technologies have created new spaces on which women and girls can exercise their right to freedom of expression and information and make their voices heard. However, these spaces have also created new opportunities for gender-based harassment and abuse, which mirror offline manifestations of discrimination and inequality. If online gender-based harassment and abuse is not properly addressed, this will have a ‘chilling effect’ on women’s right to freedom of expression and will reduce the space in which they can express themselves, participate in public and social life, and deny them the opportunity to work in online spaces.

For example, during the 2017 Kenyan election, the Internet and social media were the main avenues for women to participate in the political process to run for office and have a voice for change. ARTICLE 19 monitoring from that period revealed that women political aspirants and candidates were met with severe gender-based online abuse and harassment, pushing many of them offline and ending their political candidacies. Many of these attacks were sexual, misogynistic and reinforced the damaging patriarchal norm that politics are for men.

States should recognise that online gender-based harassment and abuse is a serious component of violence against women and adopt integrated prevention, monitoring, and response mechanisms. States should adopt a comprehensive public policy approach to tackling forms of intolerance and prejudice of which manifestations of online harassment and abuse are symptomatic of.

Participation and decision-making in public life: Bridging the gender digital divide

The Internet has become pivotal in enabling participation and decision-making in public life. According to the International Telecommunication Union Facts and Figures 2019, although there is a significant increase in the index of people having Internet connectivity, the digital gender gap has increased in recent years. Currently this gap, representing the difference between the Internet user penetration rates for males and females, is 17 per cent worldwide and 43 per cent in the least developed countries meaning that the unconnected is female, rural, older, and poor. Strategies to expand internet connectivity need to consider a cross-cutting approach, including representatives of these groups in the decision-making process.

Connectivity is not just a matter of coverage; meaningful connectivity means addressing the drivers behind the digital divide, offering affordable access to relevant content on the Internet without constraints of data limit and bandwidth. If the standards for connectivity expansion does not include fourth-generation (4G) speed connection, women and girls in remote, rural areas and impoverished regions – already behind in the access to education and work – will be the ones facing greater exclusion in the medium-to-long-term. At the same time, access to encryption technologies without interference is essential for bridging the gender digital divide and allows women to obtain information otherwise considered taboo in their societies.

Bridging the gender digital divide can be achieved in a sustainable, equitable, and affordable manner by supporting (through regulation, taxation, and financing) small and local operators, including community networks. These initiatives are present in many regions some, already managed by women, offer affordable, resilient, and scalable alternatives for connectivity, involving the community in digital training and developing relevant content in the local language. These alternatives are critical in COVID-19 pandemic, where shared access spaces such as telecenters are not possible due to social distancing demands.

Women's empowerment: Right to information

The free flow of information for women is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As a matter of priority, States must ensure that all barriers for women, in exercising their right to information, are eliminated. Through increased awareness, empowered women have greater access to opportunities, more control over resources and actions, and are better able to shape their own lives and their community and society.

When women can access information and use this to change their situation, and the structures which surround it, and protect other fundamental rights. This leads to societies that are more equal and better guarantee human rights making institutions more accountable at all levels. Then, access to information becomes a transformative right.

States should fulfil their international commitments on gender equality and access to information with particular reference, but not limited to, the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16.10.2. In order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, they should develop and effectively implement legal frameworks as well as setting policies on gender equality and access to information that are equitable and remove existing barriers for women to access information.

States should ensure that women can access information that is relevant for them with particular reference to women belonging to minorities or marginalised communities with the most appropriate means to reach them (the Internet, newspapers, message services, community radios, community groups) and in languages they speak or understand. This means information related to, among other things, sexual and reproductive rights, the use of social security benefits, resources, assets, income, education, political participation.

States should proactively publish information, including data on reports and statistics, related to gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, harassment and femicide. States should implement open government principles making sure women and representatives of minority, indigenous and vulnerable groups (LGBTQI, women with disabilities) effectively participate where decisions and measures that have impact on their lives are being discussed and taken.
