



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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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 World Wide Web Foundation, 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**

### **Achieving Women's Digital Inclusion and Empowerment: Measuring Progress, Driving Action**

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are powerful tools for achieving everything from enhanced incomes and wider access to credit, to quality education and healthcare for all and more accountable government. Yet a formidable gender gap exists in Internet access, digital skills, and online rights. Our research reveals extreme gender inequalities in digital empowerment. Across urban poor areas in 10 cities, women are 50% less likely than men to be online, and 30-50% less likely to use the Internet for economic and political empowerment. The root causes of this are high costs, lack of know-how, scarcity of content that is relevant and empowering for women, and barriers to women speaking freely and privately online. The Alliance for Affordable Internet, another Web Foundation initiative, released research that shed further light on how poverty and gender interact to keep as much as 80% of the population, mostly women, offline in some developing countries. The Report of the United Nations High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment further confirms that the digital gender divide is a major barrier to gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

Our inaugural Digital Gender Divide Audit assesses the policy efforts and progress made in 10 developing countries towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals on women and technology (including Goals 1.4, 5b and 9c). Our assessment (based on 5 key thematic areas described below) suggests that governments are not doing nearly enough to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets on women and technology by 2030.

#### **Internet Access & Women's Empowerment**

Governments have a long road ahead to achieve Sustainable Development Goal commitments on ensuring equal access to new technology for all women and men by 2030, and leveraging ICTs to empower women. Many countries lack national or sub-national policies to encourage increased access, training, and use of the Web by women and girls. A report by the Broadband Commission's Working Group on Gender found that a vast majority of National Broadband Plans fail to include gender targets. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to track progress. Majority of developing countries do not currently submit gender-disaggregated data on Internet use to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). The ITU has no gender-disaggregated data at all on other important ICT indicators. Sustainable Development Goal 17 commits governments to increase the availability of high-quality, timely, and reliable gender-disaggregated data.

#### **Affordability**

Sustainable Development Goal 9c commits governments to strive to achieve universal, affordable Internet access by 2020. But high costs are keeping billions offline. Women — who earn almost 25% less than men globally — are particularly impacted by this high cost to connect and, as a result, face limited digital opportunities. Achieving Goal 9c will require bold and immediate action. On our current trajectory, the Alliance for Affordable Internet predicts that we'll hit this

target in 2042 — 22 years after the target date set by the global community. Without urgent reform, in 2020 we will see just 16% of people in the world's poorest countries, and 53% of the world as a whole, connected. This connectivity lag will deny hundreds of millions of women and girls access to online education, health services, economic opportunity, political voice, and much more.

### **Digital Skills & Education**

The United Nations High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment notes that "Digital inclusion is critical, especially for the poor, who risk being left further behind given the fast-changing nature of digital assets and services, and their importance to future employment and income opportunities" (2016:49). "Not knowing how" to use the Internet continues to be a significant barrier for women's digital inclusion. Our Women's Rights Online study of 10 countries highlights that, among the urban poor, women are 1.6 times more likely than men to cite lack of skills as a barrier to their Internet use. Digital capabilities are increasingly critical to maximise women's earnings and employment prospects. As Melinda Gates recently pointed out, "public schools are the only place we can ensure that all students, from all walks of life, have the chance" to acquire technology skills, starting with basic digital and data literacy.

### **Relevant Content and Services**

Due to the extra burden of unpaid care work that women carry; they not only have less income than men but also less free time. As a result, time and money spent on the Internet comes at a high opportunity cost, and many women we interviewed said they simply don't feel that what they find online is worth their while. While there are many kinds of content and services that might inspire, entertain, or assist women, we have singled out two that are particularly critical to their rights and opportunities, and are also directly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal targets: (1) online availability of sexual and reproductive health information and (2) digital financial services.

### **Online Safety**

Women we surveyed said they value the Internet as a safe space to access and share ideas and information of any kind, and express themselves without fear. Although vital to Sustainable Development Goal 16 — Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — the Internet's role as a safe space for expression is being undermined by an epidemic of harassment and violence against women online, as well as growing intrusions on Internet users' right to privacy. If these trends do not change, the spread of ICTs could ultimately reinforce offline patterns of female subordination and silence.

### **Action Agenda: Achieving women's digital inclusion and empowerment by 2030**

Without a major escalation of policy effort and investment, most of the benefits of technological change will be captured by men — making gender inequality worse, not better. However, women's exclusion from the digital revolution is primarily due to policy failure, and policy failure can be reversed. Rapid progress is possible through simple steps like reducing the cost to connect, introducing digital literacy in schools, and expanding public access facilities.

We propose these shared priorities as a starting point for broad regional and global consultation, in order to agree on an international action agenda and to REACT based on the issues outlined below. By working together to close the gender digital divide, we can ensure that the full power of ICTs and the Internet is harnessed by women, putting their agency at the forefront of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Rights**

- Strengthen legal protection of the online rights and privacy of women and men, including through stronger data protection laws.
- Ensure that women and girls are able to take legal action against perpetrators of online violence, and that police and judiciary have training and resources to pursue such cases.
- Invest in large-scale, ongoing national awareness campaigns to stamp out online gender violence and educate users on their rights, privacy, and security.

### **Education**

- Integrate basic digital literacy in school curricula at all levels — from primary to tertiary — and ensure that teachers are qualified and supported to teach it.
- Ensure digital literacy goes beyond technical skills to support the ability of women and girls to participate in society and make life choices.
- Support female micro-entrepreneurs to gain digital capabilities.

### **Access**

- Prioritise policy reforms to cut the prohibitive cost of connecting. Work towards the Alliance for Affordable Internet affordability target: 1 GB of prepaid mobile data costing no more than 2% of average per capita monthly income.
- Expand free Internet access in public places, including all schools, clinics, job centres, and community centres.
- Improve infrastructure and support the development of innovative last mile-connectivity models, including by women’s collectives and organisations.
- Consider access measures specifically targeting women, such as a free basic data allowance focused on women.

### **Content**

- Expand availability of government services and data online, as well as channels for citizens to engage leaders and officials through ICTs.
- Prioritise wide online availability of user-friendly, local-language information, services and products that empower women and enhance their livelihoods.
- Audit all government websites to assess the relevance of their content for women, and their effectiveness in supporting women to access information.

**Targets**

- Incorporate concrete gender equity targets, backed by adequate budget allocations, into national ICT policies and/or broadband plans.
  - Monitor gender equality in the implementation of ICT strategies by collecting data disaggregated by gender, income, and location. Develop quantitative and qualitative indicators that measure public ICT initiatives and their impact on women.
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