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**Priority Theme: Socially just transition towards sustainable
development: the role of digital technologies on social
development and well-being of all**

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, 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

This statement is presented by Soroptimist International on behalf of its 72,000 members active in 121 countries. Soroptimists across the world are united in achieving gender equality for all. Through their own experiences Soroptimists develop and implement projects that work with women and girls to improve their well-being and to realize the Sustainable Development Goals. As today's society is dominated by digital technologies – even more so as households become isolated during COVID-19 – many Soroptimist projects place women's and girls' access, use and knowledge of digital technology at their core.

Soroptimists know technology can lift women out of poverty, grant them access to education and information including about their rights, health, and provide new economic opportunities, and facilitate physical and social mobility. However, we also know digital technologies can become tools to perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence that affects all communities. Before COVID we knew women in the public eye disproportionately experienced online aggression and harassment; activists, journalists and human rights defenders all face threats and online violence designed to prevent them from working towards a more sustainable and gender-equal world. Girls and women could be groomed, trafficked, exploited, defrauded, harassed, and violently targeted, and domestic violence could be perpetrated using digital technologies. We also knew within households, women and girls often have unequal access to digital technologies. With limited resources, the personal, professional and educational needs of men and boys are prioritized at the expense of women and girls. Men's dominance in coding and product development meant women's and girls' needs were left out of discussions of what technology needed to accomplish. When the focus has been on how technology can better the world, women's and girls' systematic omission from the development of digital technologies meant that those technologies would never contribute to a gender equal world. Future policies and interventions must address this, especially during COVID and in a post-COVID context.

While there were gender-differentiated experiences of technology use pre-COVID, since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, women's and girls' lack of access to technologies and the discrimination they experience online has become more acute, as our lives – social, education and economic – increasingly rely upon digital technologies. During COVID we have seen systemic discrimination against women with societies returning to stereotypes that disadvantage women, preventing sustainable development and impacting well-being. This discrimination is not limited by borders or national legislation – gender differentiated impacts of the coronavirus pandemic have been seen worldwide. More women have lost their jobs; are disproportionately relied upon for unpaid care work; and are unable to access education. These events disproportionately affect those with less wealth and fewer resources and are more likely to be determined by women's and their family's socio-economic status.

Without digital literacy, girls, women – and in particular older women – cannot connect to their family, friends, support networks and other critical services, including health and education. Instead, they are left vulnerable and isolated; online access is increasingly important for personal and social well-being.

Rates of violence against women, including violence and harassment committed online have increased, further highlighting the pressing need for international collaboration and coordination to manage online crime and ensure international and national legal standards are abided by online as well as offline. These standards must address online violence, privacy violations, and hate crimes. Online spaces must not

be safe havens for those perpetrating violence and discrimination. The digital gender divide must be systematically included in COVID-19 responses and considered a core dimension of gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19: without this approach hard-won gains towards gender equality will be lost and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will be impossible.

To harness the full benefits of digital technologies to build a better, gender-equal, more just, and more sustainable world, Soroptimist International recommends that the following actions be taken:

Well-being and Human Rights

- The digital technology sector should be supported through these precarious times, in recognition that they are critical to those living in vulnerable situations and conflict environments. Access to digital technologies, including radio stations, podcasts and other forms of online media and journalism is critical for women and girls as it provides them with essential information including about their human rights and healthcare issues and equips them to make informed decisions about their lives and the lives of their families while supporting social distancing measures during the COVID pandemic.
- Universal Access to Internet Services are needed to ensure that all, including those in rural areas, are able to engage with new technologies.
- Efforts must be made to work with relevant institutions and organisations to identify those isolated in society, including those living in care homes, older women, those with disabilities, girls living in state care, homeless women, women and girls living in shelters, refugees and migrants, and indigenous and rural women, to ensure that they have access to the technology and skills they need to keep social connections which are fundamental to maintaining and integrating into communities, and for social and economic mobility.
- While digital technologies are revolutionizing the modern world and are being increasingly relied upon during the global pandemic, it is critical to realize many do not have the skills needed to manage in a digital world. Older women, those who are homeless, those with disabilities and others are frequently unable to access critical information such as updates on changing laws and regulations, free legal advice, financial advice, and information on social care and benefits. They are unable to access services including healthcare, transport, social care and welfare services, education and training. These are all essential to maintain personal safety, health and wellbeing, and for personal betterment. These services must not become inaccessible because women and girls do not have or are unable to access the technology required to make appointments, pay for services or speak to service providers. Analogue access to services must be maintained and additional support provided to these individuals and groups to ensure that they are not left behind in sustainable development, and their well-being and human rights neglected.
- Online algorithms, codes and other aspects of digital technologies are able to perpetuate aspects of discrimination based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, marital status and other identities. Steps must be taken immediately to change existing aspects of digital technologies that perpetuate discrimination and prevent any future technologies from doing so.

Education and the Economy

- Governments must work with schools and other educational institutions to ensure that all women and girls who are in education are able to remain so by

providing them with the digital technology, including reliable internet access, they require to stay in education; to maintain and improve upon current rates of women's and girls' educational participation and outcomes; and to ensure that international legal obligations on women's and girls' access to education are fulfilled including for women and girls with disabilities.

- Programmes that require women's and girls' training in STEM, STEAM, including digital literacy, coding, artificial intelligence, product design and online safeguarding must be developed and implemented, with the aim of promoting women's and girls' safety online and increasing the number of women working in the digital technology sector at all levels.
- Given the multi-faceted importance of gender representation within the digital technology sector, the industry must be incentivized or required to increase the proportion of women employed within the sector at all levels. This will help ensure that new digital technologies are fully accessible to women and girls and respond to their needs.
- Men and boys, women and girls, must be educated on what constitutes online discrimination, violence and harassment as part of efforts to prevent the use of digital technologies to target women and girls and to perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination.
- Employers need to ensure that their employees have the equipment and time flexibility necessary to work from home, and to continue to up-skill their employees so that they are able to use relevant digital technologies.

Law and Regulation

- International collaboration and cooperation are necessary to prevent, investigate and prosecute crimes committed online and crimes that are facilitated by online interactions including gender-based and sexual violence, trafficking, domestic violence, harassment and abuse. International regulations must be developed to ensure cross-sector collaboration and to support evidence collection.
- National jurisdictions must upscale efforts to ensure that national legal standards are applied to online behaviour, and work with the digital technology sector to respond to online discrimination and harassment, which should include the development of national, regional and international regulation to ensure parity of standards.
- International legal standards on gender equality, discrimination and human rights remain applicable online. Efforts must be made to work with states, civil society, the digital technology sector, and other stakeholders to ensure that digital technologies are compliant with and support those international standards, including those that address the right to privacy. Major companies must be held more accountable for how their platforms and algorithms impact societies.

Digital technologies can expedite achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and realize gender equality. However, whether digital technologies do that depends upon how they are developed and used. Currently, digital technologies both empower women and girls, and contribute to the perpetuation and, in some instances, the worsening of gender inequality. Policy choices can stop that, and ensure that digital technologies serve women and girls, facilitating their ability to educate, empower and enable themselves to experience their human rights and the full benefits of sustainable development. For as long as digital technologies exist in their current form and are used as they are today with minimal oversight, regulation or regard for the impacts upon women and

girls, then the gender digital divide will persist, and women and girls will continue to be disadvantaged in development. We now have a unique opportunity to escalate efforts to achieve gender equality by integrating gender-sensitive approaches to education, the economy, health, welfare and social services, and women's leadership, within COVID-19 responses and digital technologies. This global pandemic has shown the importance of multilateralism. International cooperation in solving COVID, as with so many other issues, is essential for our survival. We should take this opportunity, on the United Nations' 75th Anniversary, to join together and act, for the benefit of all.

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