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entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 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

In all discussions regarding technology, gender matters. It matters because technology and innovation reflect the different visions of how societies are advancing gender equality and creating possible futures. There have been world-altering developments to help us communicate, collect data, document human rights violations, improve health and wellbeing, and enhance access to innovation. Women activists have used technology to amplify their safety and the safety of their communities.

Technology reflects, enhances, and embodies many of the same characteristics and qualities of the offline world. Therefore, technological developments often reflect the capitalist and destructive priorities of our world, which are frequently skewed towards brutal competition, violence, unsustainable production and consumption, and reinforcement of detrimental hierarchies and elite power. These have evidently disproportionate and differentiated gendered dynamics and impacts, which are producing tangible consequences on women's rights.

Patriarchal systems impact which technologies are developed, who develops them, how they are used, how they are regulated, and how they are understood. There are persistent barriers to internet access and connectivity for women and girls, especially in rural and conflict-affected communities. Mis- and disinformation, along with the use of 'bots', troll farms, and cyberbullying tactics, are amplifying hate speech, swaying public opinion, and creating a chilling effect for participation. Facial recognition, tracking software, internet shutdowns, surveillance spyware, and drones are among the tools used by government intelligence agencies and police forces to surveil and repress populations, particularly marginalized groups, by discriminating based on demographic categorisation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these effects were increased as many activities moved online.

Our statement specifically focuses on several ways in which technology is impacting women's rights: the impacts of online gender-based violence on participation; the weaponisation of technology; and environmental impacts of technological expansion.

Women and various social groups, particularly those of other marginalised identities, have used online platforms for personal expression, political organising, education, and community-building. In parallel, however, the forms of violence and harassment experienced by women in their daily lives have expanded into their online realities, manifesting in bullying, harassment, sexual exploitation, stalking, trolling, defamation, and leaking of private information. One UN Women study found that online harassment is the leading reported form of gender-based violence in the Arab States region.

Online gender-based violence is often perceived as less serious than violence that takes place in the "real world." However, it has the same root causes, including unequal gender relations, patriarchal stereotypes, and a lack of prevention and accountability. In fact, it is often directly linked to ongoing, or potential, offline violence. As we highlighted with the Association for Progressive Communications in a recent report: online violence "is experienced on a continuum…online doxxing of women can result in in-person rape and death threats and even bomb scares." There is no clear line between "online" and "offline."

Non-consensual sharing of private information or images can have long-term and even life-long repercussions, due to this information likely remaining accessible online. Women politicians routinely experience disproportionate harassment and abuse. The 2020 Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women found

that online threats have resulted in death for some women journalists, and harassment has led many others to leave the profession altogether. Research by The Guardian newspaper found that out of the 10 writers who experienced the most harassment in the comments section, 8 were women. The other 2 were Black men.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's General Recommendation 35 includes in its updated understanding of gender-based violence a redefinition through technology-mediated settings. However, many governments are failing to effectively prevent and respond to this violence – or are perpetrating it themselves. In recent examples, smear campaigns labelling women leaders as "traitors" or "foreign agents" have come directly or indirectly from their political opponents. Women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer people often are targets of mis- or disinformation campaigns that are personal, culturally-specific, and sexualised. Online surveillance and surveillance spyware are being used to spy on opposition parties and civil society and collect information about their activities. This can result in asset freezes, personal and professional intimidation, arrest, detention, imprisonment, torture, the closure of non-governmental organisation operations, or other censorship of free expression.

These factors have significant consequences for freedom of expression, assembly, association, and participation, among others, and therefore, for substantive progress towards gender equality. As stated by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women: "a major consequence of online and information and communication technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a society where women no longer feel safe, either online or offline, given the widespread impunity…[it] undermines the exercise of democracy and good governance". Research by Lawyers for Justice in Libya found that because of online violence, women are less likely to participate in online discussions and many now exclusively engage in private or women-only spaces – impacting their ability to have their voices heard in peace processes.

Governments around the world are prioritising investment in technologies to facilitate violence rather than equality or peace. This includes tremendous investment in "modernisation" of nuclear arsenals, surveillance, cyber warfare capabilities, militarisation of borders including with the use of drones, and exploration of how to weaponize emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

"Killer robots'', also known as autonomous weapons systems, are being designed with unavoidable algorithmic bias regarding factors such as race, disability, and gender, and could be programmed to "engage a target" (strike to kill) with no human operator or control. The inherently unpredictable nature of this complex system makes evasion of meaningful human control a threat to international humanitarian law requirements of accountability, proportionality, and assurance of distinction during armed conflicts. Meanwhile, data breaches as a tactic of cyber warfare have revealed sensitive data about sexual and reproductive health – information that can potentially lead to incarceration where abortion or same-sex relations are criminalised.

Additionally, our research with the Association for Progressive Communications found that internet shutdowns are experienced differently by people based on their identities, affecting areas of life such as personal safety, career, education, connectivity, and emotional wellbeing. All these phenomena have significant additional consequences for the most marginalised groups, including people from marginalised racial or ethnic groups, transgender people, and disabled people.

A feminist analysis of technology and innovation means, in the words of the Feminist Principles of the Internet, questioning the "capitalist logic that drives technology towards further privatisation, profit, and corporate control" and

interrogating the role, and impact, of private sector actors in our digital experiences. Emerging technologies have led to an unprecedented concentration of wealth. Legal frameworks lag behind technological developments and fail to provide sufficient safeguards for the prevention, protection and remediation of human rights abuses committed by technology companies.

The mining of minerals required for devices is also correlated with ecological destruction, human rights violations, and insecurity, with distinct gendered impacts. Multinational mining corporations have displaced and used lethal violence against local communities, appropriated agricultural land, created civil unrest, poisoned soil and water with toxic chemicals, and destroyed ecosystems. Electronic waste from technological devices, disposed of mostly in the Global South, has health and environmental consequences. These include damages to reproductive health, loss of food security, and increased risks of gender-based violence, posing obstacles to gender equality.

Achieving gender equality and addressing the challenges that come with technology and innovation require feminist solutions that are based in human rights and human-centric understandings of safety and security. As long as technology is conceived of, operates within, and perpetuates patriarchally engrained systems of oppression, it cannot be accessible, safe, or equal.

Member States are recommended to:

Ensure universal, affordable, open, equal access to the internet, as well as the right to free expression on the internet and unrestricted access to information.

Adopt regulatory standards to ensure corporate accountability from the technology industry in accordance with international human rights law, including obligations for businesses to conduct gender-responsive human rights due diligence.

Strengthen accountability and the protection of human rights and safety online through more concrete laws, policies, standards, monitoring, and protocols, in line with existing legal frameworks.

Increase the evidence base by furthering disaggregated data collection, research, and archiving.

Protect the right to privacy and curb harmful discriminatory technologies, including by working towards bans on the use of facial recognition in public spaces and export of surveillance spyware, as well as a legally binding framework on autonomous weapons systems.

Ensure women's leadership and participation in the planning, design and governance of technology and related fields, and challenge and transform gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination.

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