Soroptimist International CSW67 Written Statement

This statement is presented by Soroptimist International on behalf of its members in 122 countries and our commitment to improving the lives of women and girls in all their diversity.

Soroptimist International and supporting partners believe that access to a quality education through all levels, supported by relevant skills development throughout the life course is both fundamental and a human right to ensuring the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the digital age. Engagement in digital innovation and technological change starts with education across all forms of literacy and numeracy underpinned by digital and related skills and continues with access to lifelong learning including vocational education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic many people have seen their lives transformed by technology and digitalization. In urban and rural areas around the globe, students and teachers in schools and educational institutions became familiar with online learning and resources. Patterns of learning changed dramatically, often overnight, as there was a determined effort by those in leadership to maintain access for children and young people to enable them to continue to make educational progress. In many cases girls and young women have not benefited from the same digital access as boys and young men, especially in families where access to technology and related hardware is limited. Having only one phone or computer for a whole family often meant that girls' access was the least concern. In addition, women and girls continue to be denied access to electricity resources to power equipment which has resulted in barriers to learning, prohibiting many girls and women from having the opportunity to progress in all education levels. Added to that, COVID-19 revealed and magnified the widening digital gap between rural and urban communities and what still needs to be done to ensure no one is left behind.

In addition to COVID – 19 there continue to be the longstanding inherent challenges to girls' education that need to be addressed. These structural gender barriers that prevent girls from accessing and completing education must be eliminated. They include negative attitudes towards girls' education; adolescent pregnancy; harmful practices like FGM or early and forced marriage; increases in unpaid care and domestic work; high rates of violence against girls in schools and communities; menstruation stigma and lack of access to menstrual supplies; lack of access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, including single-sex toilets in schools and WASH facilities in the community.

To harness innovation and technology to empower women and girls, it is vital that law and policy makers responsible for infrastructure are not gender blind. The transformative changes which have resulted from responses to the impact of the pandemic on the workplaces and in the home should continue to be part of the global recovery. Women's leadership across all sectors is critical for the generation of successful and gender transformative policies and their implementation.

The world is becoming increasingly digital, exposing us to both the vast promise and peril of digital technologies. To maximize the benefits of digital technologies and address the challenges, in 2018-2019

the United Nations Secretary-General convened a High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation. In 2020, based on the Panel's report and multi-stakeholder consultations, the Secretary-General issued his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation which includes, at its core, a commitment to connect all people to the Internet. This must be the way forward for all countries.

The need to promote digital connectivity is clear and urgent: at the beginning of this Decade of Action more than one-third of the world population, 2.9 billion people, remain offline. In the United Nations designated least developed countries, less than 30 per cent of the population has access to the Internet, according to a 2021 estimate. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the cost of being offline without access to the world-wide web. Connectivity is no longer a luxury but a lifeline for working, learning, keeping in touch and accessing essential services. And among those already online, many face barriers such as lack of skills or access to appropriate equipment which prevent them from fully utilising the potential of connectivity.

In a digital world, women and girls are exposed to both the vast promise and peril of digital technologies. Access and safety are unacceptable barriers to women and girls full participation in the digital world. We must increase online safety and remove barriers so that women and girls are equally represented in shaping our digital future.

A gender lens is needed to assess the effectiveness of programs and transform the whole education system with changes to the curriculum. It must include engaging young women and girls in STEM subjects, as well as providing the basic skills which underpin these areas such as analytical and critical analysis, informatics and data analysis, project management, team working and leadership skills. Young women and girls should leave schools and colleges equipped with the skills to compete in a digital world and take on leadership roles to meet the challenges and crises the world is facing.

The world of work has also changed radically, with many jobs taking a hybrid form with people working from home. This has empowered some women to return to work as workplaces become more flexible, but it also has increased caring burdens on women as they are expected to be workers, caregivers, household managers and teachers, exacerbating traditional gender roles and issues of time poverty which women experience.

For women and girls who do not have access to technology, due to poverty, technological illiteracy, their rural location or other causes, the gender gap has widened inexorably. In certain industrial sectors, some technology has been designed for men so its size, weight and other attributes make it functionally inaccessible for many women. Technology and innovation are never gender neutral – they contribute to existing social and economic challenges and create new ones. Technology is a tool which can empower women and girls, but it must be designed, implemented and regulated in a way which fully recognises the negative, as well as the positive, impacts technology can have on all women and girls.

Specific attention must be paid to those at risk of being left behind, including rural and Indigenous women and girls, those living through conflict, refugees and internally displaced persons and women and girls in care and state institutions. Adaptive technology should be accessible to all those who wish to overcome challenges of mental and physical health barriers.

Soroptimist and its partners support those Member States which have committed to the Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education through the UNESCO ReWirEd campaign. This campaign offers concrete actions for all to pursue under three core principles:

- centre on the most marginalized,

- expand investments in free and high-quality digital education content, and

- move education to digital spaces through pedagogical innovation and change.

In the context of the above we urge all Member States to:

- Increase investments for women and girls in all forms of quality education and lifelong learning,

- Increase funding for, and participation in, programmes to ensure that women in rural communities have meaningful access to relevant and appropriate technology and training, in line with their urban counterparts,

- Provide universal internet access,

- Ensure access to appropriate digital hardware and equipment, software and sources of energy to power equipment in all centres of learning including community hubs,

- Create specific, targeted digital technology programmes to enable women and girls to regain entry into education and vocational training to building forward better for the future,

- Recognise and support a gender inclusive transformative digital and technology related curriculum preparing for future change and challenges, including online security,

- Develop and implement free or affordable digital and digitized skills training programmes which respond to the changing world of work and prepare for effective and timely adaptation, resilience and response at times of global crisis including disaster risk reduction,

- Develop data sources and indicators on gender equality and sustainable development related to the digital evolution. These should include both quantitative and qualitative sources of data, recognizing and monitoring differential data between men and women working in science, technology and other related fields,

- Promote working with CSOs who have on-the-ground experience of the digital and technological needs of women and girls in all their multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination through successfully implementing projects.