



# 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 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 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

The 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women provides an opportunity to examine the ways that technology can serve as a tool to advance gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women. Equitable use of technology is necessary to fulfill the principle of the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind,” which requires gender-responsive and innovative solutions to overcome structural barriers to sustainable development.

The education and empowerment of girls and women has been central to the work of Mercy Sisters, Associates, and Partners around the world for nearly 200 years. Working with and accompanying women and girls rendered vulnerable to economic and social marginalization in regions all over the world is critical to their personal development as well as the economic and social development of their communities.

In this 21st century, access to, use, and development of information communication technologies are essential. The digital transformation, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is a powerful opportunity to extend leadership across borders and time zones, making education and training available to women through online programs. The use of information communication technologies leads to new learning experiences, work opportunities, and access to healthcare and other services. When these technologies are tailored around the needs of girls and women, they allow for flexibility, accessibility, and reduced costs. Gender-responsive use of technology also facilitates improved access to information and participation in decision-making spaces, enabling girls and women to work for transformative change.

Yet, there is a gendered digital divide which poses a threat to women’s economic, social and political progress, and the development of their families, communities, and societies. Restrictive social norms and structural inequalities restrict girls’ and women’s full participation in formal economies, their equal access to legal and financial institutions as well as educational opportunities. These norms can widen the digital divide, prevent women and girls from accessing their human rights, and contribute to gender-based violence. As digital and online spaces have become increasingly prevalent, women and girls have been disproportionately exposed to online threats. These threats include online sexual exploitation, stalking, intimidation, breaches of privacy or doxxing, blackmail, impersonation, or non-consensual sharing of explicit images. This violence is not confined to online spaces – it often bleeds into physical spaces and turns into physical violence, and in extreme cases, human trafficking.

Without equal access to technology and the internet, girls and women cannot participate equally in our increasingly-digitized societies. Holding back girls and women in this area affects every aspect of their lives, including their ability to speak out and make decisions on issues that affect them. It can also negatively impact countries’ potential for economic growth and development.

Technology has been vital to the work of Mercy Sisters and Partners in women’s leadership development. In order to dismantle and transform structural and systemic barriers to gender equality, new approaches are required. This involves rethinking the way problems are defined, the way priorities are identified, who is engaged, how they are engaged, how solutions are delivered, and the ways we learn. Since girls and women best understand the challenges they face in their daily lives and the barriers they experience regarding gender equality, they are in the best position to define innovative solutions and lead the transformative change that is necessary to achieve them.

Women’s Collective Ireland – Blayne Blades, supported by the Sisters of Mercy, assists women through its community education and feminist approaches, aiming to address poverty, gender inequalities and social exclusion. The “Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning” focuses on supporting women to find employment, return to education or identify new skills they wish to learn. It then supports them through this process. During the COVID-19 pandemic, project coordinators helped to deliver this program using an online platform. This modality has helped women to reduce their isolation, increase their confidence, enable them to build relationships, and foster a sense of personal power to consider their plans for future employment or education. Women’s Collective Ireland works to train women in information technology skills and communication, discuss topics of women’s leadership, and provide mentoring and career counseling. The Collective accompanies women on their journey of understanding and unlocking their own strengths with encouragement to follow up their interests in particular fields, and to prepare for future careers. The approach undertaken by Women’s Collective Ireland supports individuals and collectively empowers communities to improve the quality of their lives, and actively engage in society. In this program, as well as many others, innovation, technology and entrepreneurship are engines for advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship is an example of women’s empowerment that has been put forward as a commitment to the Generation Equality Forum. The Fellowship is a learning community of women, which seeks to build upon their capacities and recognizes innovation, technology and digital education as key to women’s empowerment and feminist leadership. The program aims to tackle the digital gender divide faced by women, particularly those in the Global South. The Fellowship works to improve women's access to information communication technologies, provide technological skills-based training, and offer additional research and learning resources that are diverse in language, culture, and content. The women in the program come from diverse backgrounds, age groups, faith traditions, and different places worldwide. Therefore, online engagement in the program is critical to building relationships among participants and creating a community of solidarity that fosters women’s rights and positive change. This is encouraged through participation in virtual discussion forums, attendance at monthly webinars on topics of leadership and justice led by diverse speakers, and through the development of individual justice-related research projects. In 2021, the presentation of research and graduation from the program was conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By offering a collection of articles, videos, books, podcasts, music, and essays, the program seeks to promote educational equity, accommodate diverse learning styles, and empower all women to participate fully and equally.

Technological and digital education tools have fostered connections among emerging leaders in the Mercy World. The women participating in the Fellowship are encouraged to engage in critical thinking and ethical discernment, look at the world through a Mercy lens, and challenge oppressive systems to advance justice. In this way, the program works to expand women's capacity to influence local and global economic, political, social and environmental policies. Many graduates from the Fellowship have since taken up leadership roles in their own communities and the wider Mercy network.

Over the past three years, our world has undergone a historic moment of change. Our lives and societies are more digital than ever before, shifting the paradigm of our world from the physical to the digital space. While the COVID-19 pandemic has, in some ways, increased the existing digital gender divide, leading to increased gender-based violence and inequality, the digital acceleration has also opened a unique

opportunity to work for transformative change through innovative initiatives supporting women's economic empowerment and leadership.

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners use technology to advance gender equality, creating ripple effects that stretch across communities. Girls and women then contribute to society in many ways, such as mentoring and educating others and becoming leaders in their schools, workplaces, communities, and beyond. In order to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, now is the time to turn digital access challenges into opportunities for girls and women to take the lead and create innovative solutions to benefit our communities and societies.

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