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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
Priority Theme: Inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 for sustainable livelihoods, well-being, and dignity for all: eradicating poverty and hunger in all its forms and dimensions to achieve the 2030 Agenda**

Statement submitted by Women's Health and Education Center, 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.

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Statement

Civil Society and e-Commerce Can Help Reverse Inequality

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in mixed fortunes for some e-commerce companies, reversing the profits of firms offering services such as ride-hailing and travel. The dramatic rise in e-commerce amid movement restriction induced by COVID-19 increased online retail sales' share from 16% to 19% in 2020. Meanwhile, global e-commerce sales jumped to 26.7% trillion globally in 2019, up 4% from 2018. These statistics show the growing importance of online activities. They also point to the need for countries, especially developing ones, to have such information as they rebuild their economies in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic.

We know that the digital economy can bring great benefits to developing countries, but we need to address some critical questions to ensure that digitalization leads to the future we want. Key issues include the development implications of the use of digital platforms in terms of; data privacy, competition, job creation and the sharing of benefits.

Women's Health and Education Center's (WHEC's) advocacy projects/ programs are focused on:

1. Helping policy-makers create economic and social developments more inclusive and sustainable;
2. Helping countries that are currently lagging in e-Trade readiness to catch up;
3. Digitalization support for women's economic empowerment.

e-Commerce companies are relatively young, typically founded only in the last two decades. These firms have been more focused on shareholders rather than engaging with a wide group of stakeholders and compiling metrics on their environmental, social and governance performance. Nonetheless, there are some bright spots. For instance, e-Commerce companies provide free training to entrepreneurs on how to sell online including in some cases, specifically targeted at vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities or ethnic minorities.

Digitalization is an opportunity to propel African economies even as COVID-19 rages. The hard-hit economies of many African countries, pushed citizens into poverty, but some countries like Rwanda and Togo have used digitalization to keep their economies running. Learning from this experience – as economies digitalize, the benefits from digital payments and e-commerce multiply, thereby accelerating recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, sustaining development, and facilitating achievements of the sustainable development goals, through taxes and wages.

Technology is both a friend and a foe to development. Innovation drives prosperity, and frontier technologies – such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, biotechnology and nanotechnology – could hasten progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rapid advances can have serious downsides if they outpace the ability of societies to adapt. WHEC's new initiatives focus on the role of Civil Society Organizations as drivers of social activism towards technological advancement. Big tech companies alone cannot be trusted to come up with ethical frameworks. Civil activism is a critical force to ensure that frontier technologies work for all and not just for a few. It can also generate wider debates on how technology affects citizens' rights, privacy, data ownership and online security.

Preparing for Future

WHEC supports strategic “foresight and technological assessment” initiatives to better understand the socioeconomic and environmental implications of new technologies. Achieving this will require the invaluable local knowledge of citizens, and WHEC is fostering this through the dialogue series.

Building the capacity of civil society organizations to implement technology-based solutions, including resources provision, staff training, and platform management is critical to supporting mutual growth and development in the recent industrial revolution.

If we want frontier technologies to have positive impact in developing countries, they should not be seen as just “users technologies.” WHEC with its partners is promoting the participation of developing countries in the innovation process of technologies, in order to be able to reap long-term benefits, especially leveraging the network effect.

WHEC’s Recommendations and Initiatives in Social Activism

1. **Become champions:** Social activism can influence any moves to establish ethical frameworks for technologies such as AI and gene editing, reflecting grassroots interests across societies.
2. **Lobby for more legal tools:** As technological change often outpaces the legal and regulatory environment that was designed for a bygone era, civil society can inform lawmakers of this mismatch and lobby for change.
3. **Ensure accountability:** This is needed to ensure the commitment of all stakeholders towards SDGs and the long-term prosperity of people and protection of the planet.
4. **Drive mass information:** WHEC is raising public awareness of the multifaceted risks of rapid technological developments, including bias, discrimination, privacy, ethics, and the spread of false or misleading information.
5. **Change behavior:** Our social activism initiatives are accessible in 227 countries and territories to about 14 million subscribers every year, from its LINK Access Project, available via WHEC Global Health Line – <http://www.womenshealthsection.com/content/documents/LINK-Access-Project.pdf>.

This is a mass movement, to trigger changes in the behaviors and mindsets of tech developers to align innovation design with societal goals.
6. **COVID-1:One War That Must Be Fought Together;** published by 2021 ECOSOC High-Level Segment, Agenda Item 5, UN Document: E/2021/NGO/XX, available @ <http://www.womenshealthsection.com/content/documents/2021-WHEC-Statement-ECOSOC-Resolution-1996-31-COVID-19.pdf>

Success in the 21st century will require a participatory approach to rebuilding a robust industrial base and promoting frontier technologies that can help deliver the 2030 Agenda and its global vision of people-centered, inclusive and sustainable societies. Developing countries, particularly Least Developed Countries (LDCs), cannot afford to be excluded from the new wave of technological change.

Join the movement!

We welcome everyone!