



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

Intervention by H.E. Nawal BEN HAMOU, State Secretary
responsible for Housing and Equal Opportunities,
at the

General Discussion of the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

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New York, 09/03/23

Dear Ms. Chair,
Distinguished representatives,
Dear all,

To start, I would like to ask everyone here today one very simple question. Please raise your hand if you ever witnessed hate speech online.

Every hand raised is one too many. And that's only one of the reasons why it is so important to discuss the interlinkages between gender equality and digitalization. Because on the one hand, technological change can accelerate progress towards gender equality, for example by providing tools for activism and change or by making inclusive and quality education digitally available. On the other hand, the promotion of gender equality can contribute to technological change. By taking into account the perspectives and needs of women and girls in all their diversity, technology will become more efficient, accessible and inclusive.

However, new technologies and digitalization can also exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. The digital gender gap is still far from being closed, and especially women and girls in vulnerable situations risk being excluded in our increasingly digital society. Urgent and transformative action is needed with regards to the fact that algorithms are often not gender neutral. They can be discriminatory and perpetuate and increase sexist and stereotypical views. Artificial intelligence that doesn't consider gender equality as a prerequisite, can even be dangerous to women and girls.

Furthermore, online gender-based violence is a continuum of offline violence, and not a separate phenomenon. It can take many forms, including image-based abuse, rape or death threats or doxing, giving perpetrators of gender-based violence new means to control or harass their victims. Online violence against women and girls

is an infringement on their human rights, it can result in repeated and severe harmful experiences and can lead to women and girls withdrawing from the digital sphere.

Therefore, Belgium stresses the importance of people-centered digital transformation that ensures the full enjoyment of all human rights by all women and girls, in all their diversity. Structural barriers to gender equality need to be eliminated, gender stereotypes need to be dismantled and gender-based violence prevented. In this regard, Belgium favors the double approach to gender equality. On the one hand, we need specific, transformative actions to counter existing gender inequalities. On the other hand, gender mainstreaming should be implemented throughout all initiatives. The gender perspective needs to be integrated in all policies and programs related to innovation, technological change and education in the digital age. What is more, an intersectional approach is urgently needed, by paying simultaneous attention to intersecting forms of discrimination, including gender, age, race, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, poverty, etc. The consultation and meaningful participation of those representing these groups are essential to find solutions to the specific problems they face and to make digital spaces safer for all.

Dear participants,

Women and girls are underrepresented in the domain of innovation and technological change, both at the level of education as well as on the job market. Education must ensure equal access and promotion of digital disciplines for everyone. Furthermore, women and girls are still too often invisible or ignored in the fora where decisions on innovation and technological change are made. In many cases, they are even completely absent. There is a clear need to undertake action to foster educational and professional environments that facilitate women's and girls' access to and interest in the technological sector. Women and girls should participate on equal footing with men and boys in the development and decision-making process as key stakeholders and equal end users.

Furthermore, Belgium underlines the indispensable role of a free, diverse and thriving civil society, both in the context of gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, in all their diversity, as well as with regards to digitalization. Civil society and women's organizations, women human rights defenders, women

politicians, women media workers, women in academia and journalists are often at particular risk of threats and attacks based on their activities because they are women, especially in the digital sphere. They deserve our recognition, support and protection and we should do more to hold perpetrators to account.

Technological innovation should be used to support the distribution of reliable, science-based online information about sexual and reproductive health and rights. We need to pay attention to the fact that increased digitalization can – and clearly is - used to spread disinformation, including on sexual and reproductive health and rights and especially on abortion. Furthermore, the digital sphere is becoming the most important source of information about sexuality and other aspects of wellbeing and health for adolescents. It is therefore crucial to invest in online and digital literacy since sexual and reproductive health and rights are an integral part of the human rights of all women and girls.

Dear attendees,

Belgium is committed to addressing gender inequality within the digital sphere at different governmental levels. One example of this commitment is 'Women in Digital', a national and intersectoral strategy to counter existing prejudices and combat structural barriers to women's equal participation in the digital domain.

All of us, raising our hands, were targets of online hate speech. But we are also changemakers, who can turn things around. Let's make this happen, together.

Thank you for your attention.