JOINT STATEMENT BY THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT ON THE ADOPTION AND USE OF INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN UGANDA.

DATED 7TH MARCH 2023

At Eureka Hotel Ntinda

We gathered here today, stakeholders representing various sectors such as; Government, the Private Sector, Media, Politicians, Activists and Civil Society Organizations to join the global community to commemorate the International Women's Day 2023, under the theme **"DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality."**

Led by civil society and guided by the United Nations Observances, International Women's Day 2023 is focusing on recognizing and celebrating the women and girls who are championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education.

We acknowledge that the Government of Uganda is in line with its global commitments to improve digital inclusion and to realize the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 specific to SDG 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure and has committed the country to developing a digital vision which aims to build a digitally-enabled society that is "secure, sustainable, innovative, transformative to create a positive social and economic impact through technology-based empowerment"[1]

To further show her commitment to advancing ICT, Uganda has enacted laws and policies that regulate ICT such as the National Information Technology Authority Uganda Act (2009), Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019), National Information and Communications Technology Policy (2014). In addition, the Ugandan economy has been liberalized which has allowed many actors/private companies in the field of technology and ICT to provide services to Ugandans. Uganda has therefore adopted the use of ICT in all its sectors through innovative platforms that have advanced the provision of those services ranging from banking, transportation, service delivery, and other online related trade countrywide.[2] However, despite the existing laws and policies, access to technology and ICT is still a big challenge for women and girls in Uganda.

In Uganda, technologies and ICTs have positively impacted on the administration of justice and widespread access to legal materials and information from both the government and non-government institutions. A number of individuals have also been able to link to lawyers and other

[1] https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access-The-State-of-ICT-in-Uganda.pdf
[2] https://www.betterplace-lab.org/current-ict-approaches-to-enhance-access-to-justice-in-uganda

personnel for robust assistance even in the hard-to-reach areas. This has been through the provision of digital services ranging from SMSes and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) platforms, internet-based platforms, all the way to Artificial Intelligence, Legal Assistants, which do not only overcome the barriers in physical reach to remote areas but also solve language issues, and response times while also allowing women to access information in "safe spaces", outside men's influence. There has also been the exposure of gross human rights abuses and in many instances, the perpetrators have been brought to account.[3]

The Judiciary of Uganda has also undertaken some major steps migrated from paper-based filing system to Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS), hereinafter to be referred to as ECCMIS. This is a fully-featured system that automates and tracks all aspects of a case life cycle from initial filing through disposition and appeal to each individual party for any case type and is meant to reduce on case backlogs within courts. Despite the effort in increasing access to justice, the judiciary faces resistance to change towards the adoption of ICT by most of its officers preferring to use the old system in the delivery of justice.[4] This creates a double burden for women who already struggle to access justice because they are poorer, have a lower social status.[5]

Technology has improved diagnosis, response and treatment in every way from accuracy, to speed, to accessibility. Technology in health plays a key role in addressing one of the biggest issues in healthcare that is proper detection of illnesses or complications. It has reduced maternal mortality; however, it is still not affordable to all women in Uganda, hence remains for the few privileged who can afford. For example, the Women's Hospital in Mulago, has the latest technology but is not affordable by ordinary Ugandan women.

Innovation in ICT has changed the face of business where consumers/ clients can easily access products and transactions can be made easily with the digital platforms, however, the women have limited access to equipment for transactions such as smart phones and computers making it difficult for them to enjoy the services.

Access to technology in terms of clean, reliable energy enables farmers and agribusinesses to increase food production and engage in value-addition processing, however, women are constrained due to limited resources because the equipment needs heavy investment.

Technology has enhanced redistribution and reduction of unpaid care and domestic work. Investments in infrastructure and labor-saving technologies that are focused on household- level care tasks (e.g fuel-saving stoves, mills, wells, piped water or alternative fuels) could be effective

[3] https://www.betterplace-lab.org/current-ict-approaches-to-enhance-access-to-justice-in-uganda
[4] https://www.betterplace-lab.org/current-ict-approaches-to-enhance-access-to-justice-in-uganda
[5] https://gsdrc.org/document-library/study-on-gender-and-access-to-justice/

in reducing the time women and girls spend on unpaid care work, however, the investment is still low.

Access to education and learning has been enhanced by technology; this was witnessed during the COVID-19 lockdown measures, learners embraced digital platforms for learning, however, this was limited to a few families who could afford the equipment and pay for internet and learning sessions. The majority of learners missed this opportunity leading to poor grades.

Important to note is that despite the availability of technology and ICTs, many of the women in Uganda have a low income compared to men and therefore cannot afford to own a computer and because of their domestic roles, they are unable to spend time or visit internet cafés. This limits their access to online platforms hence the information gap. Moreover, women are less likely to know the language for communication, reading, and computer skills needed to surf the web since only 72% of Ugandan women are literate according to the UBOS 2022.

Although there has been progress registered in access and usability of ICT in Uganda, the digital divide is still wide in comparison between men and women because of the key concerns below;

KEY CONCERNS REGARDING THE ADOPTION AND USE OF INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

1.1 Limited access to and affordability of the digital world for many women and girls.

Access and affordability of the internet and other digital technologies is critical in achieving gender inclusion. Unfortunately, many structural inequalities such as those in income, education and employment opportunities increase barriers to access and use, which women are likely to experience severely.[6]

Uganda has one of the lowest internet penetration rates (29.1%) in Africa. [7] This is largely attributed to the high data prices where 1000 MB of data costs between $3 and $5, which is way above the affordability measure. The Daily Monitor[5] also reported that Uganda has the highest internet prices in East Africa as per research conducted by the regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC). As a result, millions of women and girls are either forced to depend on their husbands to access the internet or remain offline. As of January 2022, Uganda's

[6]https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Digital-Equity-Policy-Brief-W20-Japan.pdf
[7]https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-uganda

internet penetration rate stood at 29.1% of the total population (Digital 2022 Global Overview Report). Furtherstill, 49% of Ugandans own an internet-enabled phone, with 71% of those connected using a basic phone. Owing to the upward trend in prices of mobile phones, 1 in 3 Ugandans do not own a mobile phone.[8]

Underdeveloped ICT infrastructure continues to limit women's access to the digital world. According to the Electricity Regulation Authority, only 1.7 million out of the 8 million Ugandan households are connected to the national grid. This implies that only 8.5 million Ugandans have access to electricity.

1.2 Under-representation of women and girls in STEM education and careers.

From the earliest days of computing to the present age of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, women have made untold contributions to the digital world in which we increasingly live. Sadly, their accomplishments in STEM have been against all odds in a field that has historically neither welcomed them nor appreciated them.

The 2022 UACE results continue to reflect a significant gender gap in girls pursuing STEM courses at higher levels of learning. According to the report, girls offering Mathematics were as low as 6.1% and 15.9% for Biology. This results in low numbers of women pursuing STEM related careers.

This gender gap is largely attributed to the fact that women and girls are systematically tracked away from science and math throughout their education, limiting their access, preparation and opportunities to go into these fields as adults.

The 2021 UNESCO Science Report confirms this underrepresentation of Women and girls in STEM who are only 38.6% of the research workforce relative to their presence in the population.

1.3 Lack of gender responsive policies in the ICT sector

Although Uganda has enacted several laws and policies to promote gender equality for example Vision 2040, the NDP III, the Equal Opportunities Commission Act ICT such as the National Information Technology Authority Uganda Act (2009), Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019), National Information and Communications Technology Policy (2014) these are not specific with clear provisions on reducing the gender digital divide.

As a result, human rights and safety concerns such as cyber bullying, online harassment and cyberstalking have become a common part of a wider variety of violent behaviors that occur in

[8] https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/business/technology/more-ugandans-now-own-mobile-phones-1744100

digital spaces and disproportionately affect women and girls.[9] Despite the passing of the Privacy and Data Protection Act to protect the rights of online users, however, there is still a massive presence of online sexy contents, pornography or contents objectifying women and the consumption of such materials that further acts of violence against women. This undermines the AfDEC principle on Gender Equality that requires the creation and promotion of online content that reflects women's voices, needs and rights.

Beyond online harassment and cyberstalking by non-state actors, Uganda's legal environment is unfriendly as it provides for surveillance and lawful interception and monitoring of communications in the course of telecommunications, postal or any other related services or systems.

As long as there is insufficient progress on the structural issues above among others, there will be an undermine in the ability to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5, whose aim is to achieve gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination, violence and any harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres, their full participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political and economic decision-making.

1.4 Certain negative cultural norms also contribute to the fact that ICTs are not for women and label those women who have access and use as disrespectful in society. This tends to keep women behind the global trends in ICT even at a young age as girls where they are supposed to embrace it early. In addition, with the multiple demands in unpaid care and domestic work, it is clear that women have less spare time than men to engage in the use of ICT and this is one of the barriers.

1.5 Women have **inadequate skills required to use ICT equipment**. Given the low literacy rates among women, the majority do not benefit from innovations.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We call upon Government to strengthen its role and invest enough resources towards making ICT services nearer to all Ugandans and more especially women who majority have for long been left out as a way to reduce the digital divide
2. Government should make broadband internet accessible and affordable to all ugandans in the urban and rural areas
3. Government has to reduce taxes on technology, innovation and ICT equipment such that they become affordable to average Ugandan women. Our call is specific to technology related to smart and clean agriculture, reduction of unpaid care and domestic work, business equipment among others.

[9] ICRW, Defining and Measuring Technology facilitated Gender Based Violence.https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Digital-Equity-Policy-Brief-W20-Japan.pdf

4. Government and other actors should invest in skilling women and girls to enhance access and use of technology and ICT.
5. The Ministry of ICT and National Guidance should ensure that ICT policy frameworks have women's unique perspectives and views integrated in order to produce a robust law that is gender-sensitive in order to reduce the digital divide.
6. The Uganda Communications Commission should work with telecommunication service providers to improve access and affordability by lowering the cost associated with internet data and other digital technologies for women and girls in order to enhance affordability.
7. Government to invest more resources on the Electronic Court Case Management Information System (ECCMIS), to enhance speedy access to justice for women and girls.
8. The Ministry of ICT, and NITA-U should populate and expedite the implementation of the Data Protection Policy by passing the required regulations and setting up relevant offices.
9. The media should strive to inform, educate and mobilize the public to respect and promote women' rights online.
10. The media should also improve on their professionalism in reporting about cases of online violence against women.
11. Civil society organizations should seek to build stronger multi-stakeholder coalitions to advance and promote women's rights online.
12. The international community should encourage the Government of Uganda to develop infrastructure and lower internet costs to ensure extended connectivity and increased affordability of ICT services which will help bridge the digital divide within the rural and urban areas, as well as between women and men.

We believe that technology and ICT is one of the major drivers towards achievement of gender equality, ending poverty, ending hunger, boosting the economy, achievement of better health and education among others. We therefore call upon various stakeholders to play a role in improving access, adoption and use of digital tools, skills, and innovations to advance gender equality in Uganda.

Thank you, For God and My Country.

United Women Can!

National Baha'i Committee for Advancement of Women, Women Engineers, Technicians and Scientists of Uganda (WETSU), Disabled Women's Network and Resource Organization (DWNRO)