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and Criminal Justice**

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**Comprehensive strategies for crime prevention
towards social and economic development**

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International***

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The 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice March 2021

In preparation for the Kyoto Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in April 2020 the report (A/CONF.234/11 23 January 2020) presented by the Secretariat said:

“In a little more than two decades, the rapid growth of the Internet and information and communication technologies has enabled economic growth and broad access to vital services but has also created new opportunities for criminal activities. Criminals have become the unintended beneficiaries of new technology and globalization as those developments have enabled them to commit crimes and profit from them by exploiting transnational activities and to expand their illicit activities and businesses on digital platforms in a way that has lowered the risks, in particular the risk of detection.

On the other hand, new and existing technologies provide new opportunities for law enforcement actions, criminal investigation and prosecution. Improving public safety and empowering law enforcement and criminal justice authorities to prevent and combat crime through technological advances may have a positive impact on achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 16.”

In only a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world enabling new opportunities for all aspects of communication technologies to become a greater part of our lives, for better or worse.

For many women and girls it has been, and is, worse.

- Gender based violence, especially domestic violence and abuse, has been reported as having increased from many countries but often without law enforcement agencies taking women reporting incidents seriously. Added to which victims are often forced to stay with perpetrators because of pandemic restrictions.
- Other forms of violence against women and girls is beginning to increase, such as forced and child marriage and FGM with laws being broken openly.
- Women and girls have become more vulnerable to exploitation such as trafficking.
- The gender technology divide impacts greatly on women who have little or no access to mobile technology or any form of computer, in many cases decreasing their ability to get information or even call for help.

With COVID-19 forcing many to work, learn, seek health care and socialize from home, digital technologies and Internet connectivity have never been more a part of our daily lives.

School closures to stop the spread of COVID-19 are having an adverse impact on many communities. They have affected over 90 per cent of the world’s student population – 1.6 billion children and youth. Young women and girls are most directly affected and it is predicted that many will not return to education.

Many schools are offering remote learning to students through virtual classrooms to mitigate the impact of school closures. While this is an option for some, it is out of reach for many.

Lack of access to education and information leaves young people, especially girls and their families more vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups.

At the same time there is growing evidence to demonstrate that criminal activity such as trafficking in human beings, especially women and girls, has been made easier through the use of digital communications. It has been reported by EUROPOL that

social media is assisting the traffickers, especially of migrants, to maintain contact and receive instructions digitally thus quickly evading law enforcement authorities.

In all of this it is women and girls who are proving the most vulnerable. Education has been regularly identified as the way forward for women and girls to achieve gender equality, as well as ensuring that all women and girls are empowered and know about the laws that are there to protect them – too often women and girls do not seek assistance due to a lack of information.

It is inevitable that the research on any of the above will be ongoing for years to come but so far the research indicates in all of the above situations that women and girls are feeling the societal consequences which may put back their fight for gender equality for many years unless the future is Built Back Better.

We urge Member States:

- To increase investment in digital communication infrastructures to ensure that law enforcement agencies are able to stay ahead of the criminal groups in monitoring those aspects of crime which face women and girls such as domestic violence and human trafficking;
- To support universal Internet access, mobile hotspots and digital devices to increase access to information including health and safety and legal rights;
- To ratify CEDAW without reservations, support the Istanbul Convention and review national legislation to ensure it meets with internationally recognized and agreed standards;
- To hold law enforcement agencies accountable for not upholding legislation; the police, lawyers, judges and other legal professionals should be trained in gender-sensitive approaches;
- Introduce gender equality awareness-raising and education programmes for all law enforcement agencies so that women and girls are believed;
- Involve NGOs in supporting national and international efforts to eliminate gender violence;
- Collect and disaggregate more robust data on the basis of age, relationship status, sexuality, ethnicity, race, disability and other factors to inform policy measures and actions, and so that we can have a better understanding of gender violence.

Supporting the statement: Zonta International