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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations  
Subject: Gender equality and youth: opportunities and risks of digitalisation  
- Executive Summary

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Delegations will find attached the executive summary of the report entitled "Gender equality and youth: opportunities and risks of digitalisation"<sup>1</sup> prepared by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) at the request of the Austrian Presidency.

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<sup>1</sup> Report on the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, with particular reference to critical areas of concern "L: the Girl Child."

## Executive Summary

EIGE's research shows the many ways digital technologies are benefiting young people in terms of access to learning, friendship, information and mobilisation. It also shows that aggressive behaviour online is anticipated and normalised. As a result, young people have developed pre-emptive coping strategies. Young women and girls in particular considerably restrict what they express online for fear of cyber-aggression, sexualised cyberbullying, gossip and hateful comments. For boys, the tendency seems to be to ignore and minimise the abuse experienced, whether that abuse be directed toward girls or boys.

For the EU to harness the potential of digital technologies for youth mobilisation, diminishing the power of gender stereotypes online and promoting the diversity of voices, opinions and gender expression are essential. The opportunities and threats of digitalisation for gender equality are rarely explicitly recognised. It is crucial that the EU institutions and the Member States incorporate a gender perspective into all digital youth initiatives and that they recognise that digital media offers a powerful tool for mobilisation in support of gender equality. Provided that there is targeted support and funding for women's empowerment, digitalisation can significantly contribute to the pursuit of an inclusive, equal and participatory society.

In the EU, 92 % of young women and 93 % of young men use the internet every day. This reflects a substantial increase since 2011, when 81 % of EU youth used the internet daily. Although the level of use is almost identical among young women and men, it is worth noting that gender gaps to the detriment of women are still a reality among older generations.

Young people represent the most digitally skilled generation in the EU, with 56 % of young women and 58 % of young men aged 16-24 holding above-basic digital skills. The rest of this generation have either basic or low digital skills. By comparison, only around one-third of the population aged 25-54 have above-basic digital skills. The fact that the majority of adults in Europe in 2017 had low to basic digital skills<sup>2</sup> would seem to suggest that many parents, teachers and educators may be lagging behind young people when it comes to digital skills. It is estimated that only 20-25 % of students in Europe are taught by digitally confident and supportive teachers who have ready access to ICT and have few obstacles to using it in school<sup>3</sup>. Investment in life-long learning and efforts to remove barriers to occupational training offer ways to support teachers in updating and increasing their level of digital skills. Such training could additionally benefit gender equality within the teaching profession, which remains female-dominated across Europe (EIGE, 2017c).

***Although young women and men have similar digital skills, young men indicate higher confidence in their digital skills***

Throughout the EU, a similar share of young women and men feel sufficiently skilled to use digital technologies in their daily lives<sup>4</sup>, yet boys feel more confident about their digital skills. For example, 73 % of boys, compared to 63 % of girls, aged 15-16 feel comfortable using digital devices that they are less familiar with. In countries with an overall lower level of youth confidence in digital skills (e.g. AT, FI, LV), the gender gap to the disadvantage of girls is particularly large, reaching as high as 25 p.p. in Finland.

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<sup>2</sup> 57 % of women aged 25-54 and 52 % of men aged 25-54 as shown in figure 1.

<sup>3</sup> Source: A common European response to shared goals A concept for tackling the digital skills challenges in Europe Outcome of the DSM Sub-group on digital skills, available via [http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc\\_id=43900](http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=43900)

<sup>4</sup> According to Special Eurobarometer 460, in 2017, 92 % of young women and men aged 15-24 consider to be sufficiently skilled in the use of digital technologies in their daily life.

At the EU level, the gender gap in overall digital skills can be attributed more specifically to a gap in problem-solving digital skills, to the detriment of young women. In countries where young women outnumber men in basic problem-solving digital skills, more young women also tend to have above-basic overall digital skills. Altogether, this shows the importance of improving digital problem-solving skills among young women in order to close the gender gap in overall digital skills.

### ***Digital spaces are gendered spaces which hinders the participation of young women***

Overall, young women and men have a very high level of social engagement online, yet gender-specific patterns appear for certain activities. Young people show a very high participation on social networks, compared with all other generations, even young adults aged 25-29<sup>5</sup>. Somewhat more young women (60 %) than men (56 %), engage in uploading self-created content. Despite the higher overall participation of young women on social networks<sup>6</sup>, more young men (26 %) than young women (18 %) post comments on online articles or through online social networks or blogs. In general, more young men (55 %) than young women (46 %) follow debates on social media, for example by reading articles on the internet or through online social networks or blogs. Young women's lower engagement in online debates or in the reading of news can be linked to research suggesting that their online presentations involve complex negotiations between the social status rewards of online self-exposure and a risk of harsh judgment, young women being readily castigated for being "too" public. Research also highlights the significant time and effort that young women are required to invest in order to maintain an online presence displaying "appropriate femininity" as socially expected (Bailey & Steeves, 2015). Girls' lower engagement in debates on social media may be a preventive strategy to avoid harsh criticism.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Eurostat, in 2017, 89% of young women and 87% of young men aged 16-24 have used online social networks in the past three months compared to 83 % and 79% of women and men aged 25-29.

<sup>6</sup> PISA data indicates that 82% of young women, aged 15-16, participate in online social networks every day or almost every day compared to 72% of young men the same age.

### *Political activities online are more fraught for girls and young women*

According to the present study, the percentage of youth who in the preceding three months had posted opinions on civic or political issues online, or participated in online consultations or voting (for example to decide or express their opinion on urban planning, or signing a petition) is low. The share of young women posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites is particularly low<sup>7</sup>.

This finding mirrors data from a recent analysis of 'traditional' political participation in 18 western democracies which showed that women were less likely than men to share their political opinions publicly (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). It also supports research carried out with politically-involved young people showing that they were reluctant to engage in political debate on social media out of concern for self-presentation and to a lesser extent, out of fear of receiving negative feedback (Storsul, 2014). The fact that social media erases nearly all social context from acquaintances can lead to "a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive" (Marwick, 2010). Given that girls and young women are socialised from an early age to carefully monitor self-presentation both off and online, such pressures could explain girls' lower propensity to take part in civic and political debates, in line with their lower overall participation in online debates in general.

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<sup>7</sup> 14% of young women aged 16-24 have posted opinions on civic or political issues via websites compared to 18 % of young men of the same age.

## *Exposure to online harassment has far-reaching effects on young women's online engagement*

***"The things you get hated for are your opinions and sexual things, if you're a girl. That's about it."***

*Girl, focus group participant, Sweden*

More young women (9 %) than young men (6 %) report being a victim of online harassment (including but not limited to cyber harassment, blackmailing, and other offenses). For the first time, in 2013, the Health Behaviour In School-Aged Children Study asked school children whether they had experienced cyberbullying, either through messages or through pictures (Inchley & Currie, 2013). The data shows that 12 % of 15-year-old girls have been cyberbullied by messages at least once

compared to 7 % of boys<sup>8</sup>. After witnessing or experiencing online hate speech or abuse, 51 % of young women and 42 % of young men in the EU hesitate to engage in social media debates due to fear of experiencing abuse, hate speech or threats. This indicates that the impact of online harassment is disproportionately felt by young women. Cyber-harassment from peers and strangers often make young people, especially girls, less willing to be politically active online. To avoid criticisms and abuse related to their identities, more young women than young men restrict their political activities online (as they also do offline), thereby missing out on the full advantages of digital media.

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<sup>8</sup> Young people were asked whether they had experienced anyone sending mean instant messages, wall-postings, emails and text messages. Data for the EU-27 (data for Cyprus and Northern Ireland is not available). Source: EIGE's calculations from HBSC 2013/2014. Available at [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/303438/HSBC-No.7-Growing-up-unequal-Full-Report.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/303438/HSBC-No.7-Growing-up-unequal-Full-Report.pdf?ua=1)

## *Gender norms are exacerbated online*

Experts interviewed in the course of the project expressed the concern that social media, especially young women's high engagement in uploading self-created content (notably pictures), reinforced the objectification of women and girls. The omnipresence of beauty standards online establishes an aesthetic norm that weighs on heavily women and girls and hinders their participation in public and political life. This concern is reflected in data from the World Health Organisation showing that almost one in two 15-year-old girls thinks she is too fat, compared to about one in four boys<sup>9</sup>.

High exposure to sexually-objectifying media has been shown to lead young women to internalise beauty standards and see themselves as objects rather than people with agency<sup>10</sup> (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Wolf, 2013), which in turn is shown to lessen girls' and young women's propensity to engage with public affairs, including participating in a vote (Heldman & Cahill, 2007).

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<sup>9</sup> In the EU 27, 47.2 % of 15 year old girls think they are too fat compared to 23.2 of male peers. Source: EIGE's calculations from WHO Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children, accessible: [www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/303438/HSBC-No.7-Growing-up-unequal-Full-Report.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/303438/HSBC-No.7-Growing-up-unequal-Full-Report.pdf?ua=1)

<sup>10</sup> This process is referred to as "self-objectification"

***"But I think men have more trouble to talk about things. Even if we are abused, we don't talk about it."***

*Boy, focus group participant,  
Sweden*

Experts stressed the facts that boys are also exposed to widespread objectification of women online, particularly through the problematic depiction of women in games<sup>11</sup>, as well as to unhealthy representation of "male" attitudes and behaviours, increasingly referred to as "toxic masculinity". As an example, boys whose behaviour is judged not manly enough or boys who are considered to be gay are often mocked online. Boys mentioned how hard it was for boys to speak up about abuse or cyberbullying, especially when they lacked a supportive family environment: *"For a boy saying 'they make fun of me' it's embarrassing"* (boy, IT, 17). Findings indicate some boys may overestimate their own ability to handle problems online, and are less prepared than girls to seek and accept help, which is probably related to stereotypical standards of boys being expected to 'man up'.

Boys also discussed pressure from male peers to request or demand nude pictures from girls and further pressure to share such pictures without consent. Both male and female participants noted society's different standards concerning sexual behaviour, when girls and women are blamed for their sexual agency, whereas boys are praised. Victim-blaming attitudes were prevalent among focus group participants.

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<sup>11</sup> In 2015, almost half of boys aged 15-16 (49 %) in the EU-28 play collaborative online games every day or almost every day. The corresponding percentage for girls the same age is 7 %.