

Opening Remarks at the Asia Pacific Regional Consultation on the Priority Theme of CSW67

Speaker: Ms. Villaney Remengesau, Pacific Disability Forum

Your Excellencies, distinguished speakers, honourable members and delegates, colleagues and my fellow sisters.

It is a privilege to be invited to speak to this consultation prior to CSW67 and to represent and amplify the voices of women's right organisations, feminists and civil society organisations from across the Asia Pacific region.

Digital revolution is claimed to have allowed social, political and economic prosperity of the global community, yet Global South faces a myriad of challenges in relation to equality and inclusion in digital transformation, privacy and autonomy over the management and utilisation of digital data and accountability and transparency of actors who are driving and controlling the "digital revolution". Structural and historical inequalities of power, wealth and resources between men and women, between rich and poor and between countries are consolidated in this technology-driven 'digital era'. Technology, innovation and digitalisation cannot be a solution, or even a tool, to advance women's human rights and gender equality and Development Justice unless it is grounded in the realities and aspirations of women and girls in all their diversity.

As a woman with disability, I did not have an opportunity to define what kind of technology, innovation or even understand that digitalisation would help in advancing human rights, fundamental freedoms and development of myself or my communities. What I learned from the civil society forum is that it is a shared reality among women and girls across Asia and the Pacific. The critical question remains - who defines technology, innovation and digitalisation- and for *whom* and for *what*? It certainly was not for us, by us, or with us.

The conversations in the CSO Forum addressed all the thematic areas of the Regional Consultation but let me prioritise the issues that need your particular attention. These issues are the realities of women and girls in our region but not appropriately addressed in the current discourse of the CSW67.

First, we note with grave concern that there is a rise of oppressive cyber criminalisation regulations and laws that intrinsically encroach on civil liberties, including freedoms of expression and opinion. Military technology and surveillance are used to create conflicts, sustain power structures, attack women human rights defenders and undermine democratic participation and peoples' sovereign power.

Oppressive regulations are also being introduced in some countries in the region to police and repress the sexual expression of women and queer people, violating their right to bodily autonomy and agency. Such a repressive regime has historically failed to curb perceived and imagined threats but instead has constrained civil freedoms and rights online and offline. The imposition of excessive imprisonment and fines for online behaviour and speech has also led to self-censorship among women

and girls and LGBTIQ+ people and other marginalised communities, further shrinking civic space and democratic participation. Punitive responses disproportionately impact the structurally silenced.

Second, we must examine the consequences of the digital transformation on human rights and the climate crisis. If the Internet was a country, it would be the sixth biggest electricity consumer on the planet. Production of cellphones and computers comes with its own environmental footprint across the lifecycle – including extraction of rare minerals and processing them for use in these devices. Similarly, the increasing level of green energy technologies that power digital technologies also have supply chains based on extensive use of metals and rare earth minerals.

All these extractions are associated with land, water and resource grabbing with impunity at the cost of peoples' life and livelihoods. The environmental footprint of the infrastructure for digital transformation poses serious threats to our planet and future generations yet policy conversations on these issues and challenges remain missing in political corridors.

We urge you to consider the following recommendations:

- Take into account individual security and human rights in the policymaking discourses around cybersecurity, and recognise that cybersecurity and protection of human rights are mutually complementary, interlinked and interdependent.
- Decriminalise and protect the act of resistance and organising for women's human rights, gender equality and Development Justice. Instead, recognise the important role and contribution of women human rights defenders, feminist movements and civil society.
- Ensure women, LGBTIQ and other marginalised groups are able to exercise their SRHR free from violence, coercion and discrimination in both online and offline spaces.
- Transform macroeconomic policies, including trade rules and seek an accountability mechanism to regulate large tech and digital companies.

We urge you to address and respond to these priority issues that are acutely felt by women, girls and their diverse communities in Asia and the Pacific.