



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX February 2017

English only

Human Rights Council

Thirty-four session

Agenda item 3

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Girls' Education and the Peace Process

On his first day in office, January 1, 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres asked the world to resolve to put peace first. He urged us to make 2017 a year in which global citizens strive to overcome their differences and he appealed to us to join him in committing to peace every day.

In 1919 Graduate Women International (GWI) was founded as the International Federation of University Women by graduate women who also believed in peace. GWI's founding graduate women believed that fostering peace and friendship through education could prevent world catastrophes. Today, nearly 100 years later, GWI continues to unite thousands of women graduates around the world who share a modernised ideal of that founding vision. GWI continues to advocate for improved access of girls to quality, secondary education, to diminish the barriers girls face when trying to attain an education and for continued training up to the highest levels as a contribution to the peace process.

GWI underscores the crucial role of education in contributing to building a culture of peace noting that education is the key to uniting nations and improving goodwill. Through our work in girls' secondary and tertiary education GWI is striving to change today's global extremisms into a global culture of peace and non-violence which will in turn positively contribute to the core fundamental human rights as outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

GWI recognizes that in many parts of the world, and for far too long, populations have been suffering because of radicalisms and violent conflicts. In a world tense with combat and poverty, hunger and disease, girls' education is one of the few silver linings that can contribute to meaningful improvements to the peace process. This evidence is clear and is indisputable in numerous studies. With so much to gain, why are girls still facing so many barriers in gaining secondary and tertiary education?

Some experts note reasons such as lack of priority to girls' education on the part of national governments including insufficient spending as a percentage of GNP, or inequitable distribution of funding and resources. Other studies report lack of effective action by the international community in the use of development assistance. Within Member States, poverty, child labor, distance from school, unequal access due to gender or cultural factors, and the existence of conflict are all barriers to the enrolment of girls in school thus hindering peacebuilding.

Education presents invaluable opportunities in all societies to promote gender-transformation for building sustainable peace. Education can be transformative when it is equitably available, of good quality, relevant and can touch the lives of every girl. Education is not merely a social science to measure; education serves to develop a girl's identity and can remove harmful gender stereotypes that may undermine girl's ability to contribute to peacebuilding. Member State's education systems and teachers therefore play a vital role in the process of promoting gender equality and providing opportunities for girls to contribute equally and positively to peacebuilding processes for future generations.

Girls in conflict-affected areas face higher barriers to accessing education due to such issues as the lack of security and threats of violence related to attending and getting to school, gender-based violence within schools, the lack of essential 'girl-friendly' infrastructure, trafficking, and child marriage. Resulting gender disparities in access to education and completion of schooling deny girls the opportunity to gain skills needed for civic and political engagement and to make an active contribution to peacebuilding.

GWI underscores that the role of women's socio-economic empowerment is also critical to building successful peace processes. The barriers women face as girls trying to access quality education in both conflict and post-conflict environments and even in developed societies are documented and this evidence shows that girls' education can be transformative for entire societies, influencing not only girls' lives, but can also change social norms and peacebuilding.

GWI affirms that educated women and girls are more likely to engage in and own peacebuilding processes. We are concerned that girls' access to quality education is a structural barrier to her productive community participation and leads to challenges such as lack of opportunities for employment. GWI emphasizes that peacebuilding initiatives benefit from women's ideals and learned skills and we encourage Member States to leverage these skills.

Higher educated women tend to be healthier than uneducated women, participate more in the formal labor market, earn higher incomes, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and enable better health care and education for their children. All these factors combined can help lift households out of poverty and increase the opportunity to live in peace.

The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to “leave no one behind,” ties directly to nourishing the peace process. GWI calls on the Council to recognize that achieving success for the 2030 Agenda and sustaining peace is not only found in Goal 16 but across all 17 Global Goals; with GWI placing special emphasis on Goals 4 and 5 as critical indicators to improving peace.

Education is a prerequisite for both peace and economic development. Quality education systems can help transform societies, especially those affected by conflict. Equality, respect and tolerance learned in the classroom have an impact throughout society, while schools are powerful symbols of Member State’s investment in its people.

To address the above opportunities and challenges for girls and women, GWI appeals to the Council to encourage Member States to:

- Promote and facilitate equal opportunities for women in leadership, peacekeeping and decision making;
- Provide formal and informal learning opportunities for minorities such as girls and women with disability, indigenous communities, refugees and women whose lives have been disrupted by natural disasters, war, genocide and post-conflict dislocation;
- Commit to teacher training and recruitment to meet a looming global shortfall and appropriately train teachers for minorities and vulnerable groups;
- Provide safe access to education for girls and women which includes unhindered passage to reach schools;
- Ensure that all girls and women have safe learning environments that are free from violence, harassment and discrimination. States must implement concerted plans of action to tackle violence against girls and women, including adopting criminal legislation that penalises the perpetrators;
- Ensure that cultural and traditional practices do not detract girls’ and women’s right to access quality education; this includes combatting child marriage by increasing protection for victims under national legislation and by adopting and adhering to international legal standards;
- Implement universal access to free, quality secondary education;
- Design gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogies;
- Include and target boys and men as part of discussions about cultural and societal practices.

GWI emphasizes that education offers knowledge and skills that provide protection, while in the longer term, education can help develop values and attitudes that prevent conflict and build peaceful societies. Education has the potential to build the capacities of children, parents, teachers and community members to prevent, reduce and cope with conflict and to promote equality and peace.

GWI urges the Council to reflect that educating girls boosts confidence and hope; promotes independent thinking, builds communication and negotiating skills, reduces support of terrorism and militancy; upsurges political involvement and cultivates respect, all of which positively influence the peacebuilding process.