



General Assembly

Distr.: General
19 February 2019

English only

Human Rights Council

Fortieth session

25 February–22 March 2019

Agenda item 3

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

Joint written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), Canadian Federation of University Women, Women Graduates - USA, Inc., non-governmental organizations 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.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



From knowledge to action: institutes of higher education as key drivers towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda and its centrepiece, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are often referred to as ambitious and the most important global agreement in recent history. The SDGs call for a transformation of the way societies function with each other and interact with the planet. This transformation pressingly requires new visions, new technologies, political and institutional will, and, above all else, innovative and equal education opportunities.

For 100 years, Graduate Women International (GWI) has promoted the advancement of the status of women and girls through lifelong learning and education. Today, as strong as ever, our international network of more than 15'000 graduate women is brought together by the core belief that equal access, by women and girls around the world, to education in all domains and at the highest levels is both a fundamental human right and a key to the achievement of economic growth and world's sustainable development. GWI, through the coordinated actions of its National Federations and Associations across 56 countries, actively promotes and contributes to the achievement of the SDGs. Our multilevel advocacy work and grassroots projects, derived from our century-long commitment to women's education particularly focuses on SDG 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and SDG 5, achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls. However, GWI emphasizes the intrinsic interconnection between the 17 SDGs and underscores the crucial link between institutes of higher learning, the empowerment of women and girls and the achievement of sustainable development.

As graduate women, GWI and its affiliates recognize the transformative power of education and the unique position of universities to influence the implementing the SDGs. Education, research, thought innovation and leadership skills are essential to building the pathways towards sustainable futures. Given their access to large numbers of young people, accordingly, institutions of higher education can have a direct impact on the successful implementation of the SDGs. We emphasize that the commitment by the global higher education sector is critical to the achievement of the SDGs.

Why are universities and institutes of higher learning critical for the achievement of the SDGs?

One of the core functions of a university is learning and teaching and, respectively, education is one of the foundations of the SDGs as stated in SDG4 which calls for providing "inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all." Several of the SDG4 targets clearly include action items for universities. As example, GWI recalls target 4.3 to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality, technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. We also highlight the needed commitment by universities to realise SDG target 4.7b, to substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries for enrolment into higher education.¹

The unique access by universities to large concentrations of young people allows them to directly contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. Furthermore, universities galvanize and mobilise young women and provide them with the comprehensive academic and vocational training needed to implement the SDGs.

Additionally, universities are leaders in sustainable development research, promotion of solutions and support for implementation of SDGs. They create current and future SDG implementers. GWI applauds the more than 300 universities, globally, who have joined the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), a partner of the United Nations who

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

provides higher education institutions with a unique interface between higher education, science, and policy making², and the partnering university's commitment to teaching sustainable development across all disciplines of study. As brokers of knowledge, GWI rightly encourages research and dissemination of sustainable development information and sharing information with international networks.

Insisting on the importance of knowledge sharing and research cooperation also aligns with SDG17, strengthening the means of SDG implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. GWI, therefore, calls for a continued global, concerted effort to extend and cultivate the potential of partnerships, collaboration and networks that provide a unique interface between higher education institutions and national and international policy makers.

Through their current actions in these critical areas, universities already make important contributions to the achievement of the SDGs. However, to make significant contributions, all institutions of higher education must become champions of women and girls' education, sustainable development and play a leading role in the implementation of the SDGs. Engaging with young women will benefit universities by enabling the institution to create relevant, gender-demanded SDG-related curricula, build new partnerships, access new funding opportunities. To bring all institutions of higher institutions on the dynamic path towards the achievement of all 17 SDGs, GWI also underscores the crucial importance of cooperation and sharing best-practices and skills through the academic sector and with other key sectors of civil society, such as the public and private sector at the local, national and international level.

Further, we suggest that universities create strong alliances and leverage links with nongovernmental organizations such as GWI to promote awareness about their lifelong distance, online and vocational learning platforms that also contribute to the success of the SDGs in their efforts to contribute to the implementation of all 17 SDGs. Through our extensive network of graduate women, universities and institutes of higher learning will more readily increase their knowledge-base.

Recommendations:

With their broad remit to create and disseminate knowledge and the critically transformative role they play in society, institutions of higher education must continue to be engaged as crucial players in the implementation of the SDGs. GWI, and its worldwide affiliates, recommend the following actions to the 40th session of the Human Rights Council, the HESI and the global higher education sector to collectively:

- Create a national and regional Sustainable Development Forum for institutions of higher education.
- Work with universities to add to the curriculum a mandatory course about the SDGs for first year university students, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Sustainable Development Agenda.
- Elevate the commitment to the promotion and achievement of the SDGs as a standard for all institutes of higher education through the creation of International Award of Sustainable Excellence, rewarding the top global University SDG Champions.
- Promote the creation of interdisciplinary teachings related to the SDGS to provide students with multidisciplinary skills and knowledge and empower them to tackle the sustainable development issues related to their field of studies.
- Continue to encourage collaboration between institutions of higher education at the global level as a means of realizing SDG17, seeking to strengthen global partnerships to support and achieve the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda.

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi>

- Integrate, implement and embed the SDGs within university strategies, policies and plans.
- Substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States, SDG 4.7c target.

GWJ recognises that addressing the challenges of the SDGs bears global responsibility and we explicitly call on the Human Rights Council, the private sector, civil society, and academic sectors to collaborate on the achievement of the SDGs. However, given the size of the task of achieving the SDGs, and the critical roles universities have in delivering on the SDGs, there is an urgent need for this sector to accelerate action.
