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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 on the roster

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

[22 August 2019]

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

Graduate Women International: Women and International Trade Eradicates Extreme Poverty and Creates Vital Livelihoods

Concerningly, on 21 August 2019, the United Nation, Geneva announced that achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to eradicate poverty, inequality and address environmental issues by 2030, is off track. They are calling for 2020 to be the year to course correct; for 2020 to be the year of ‘super activism’ towards achieving the SDGs. Graduate Women International (GWI) urges that, vital to this course correct, is the increase of trade opportunities for women and the uptake of their influences in trade negotiations.

“Action is needed to better integrate women into the international trading system. All the evidence suggests that giving an equal economic chance to women is not only economically important; it results in beneficial outcomes for society as a whole”, Roberto Azevêdo, Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Studies show that women invest about 90% of their income back into their families (notably in education and health) and in their communities. Increasing a woman’s economic power, therefore, has a "snowball effect" on society to reduce poverty.¹ Increasing financial possibilities for women will contribute to the success of the SDGs, especially SDG 5 for Gender Equality, SDG 8 for Decent Work and Economic Growth and SDG 10 to Reduce Inequalities; and, interconnectedly, contributes to the achieving SDG 1 No Poverty and SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

On the occasion of the 42nd session of the Human Rights Council, GWI is raising awareness about the importance of women participating in trade as a means to improve their financial situation. In doing so, GWI voices support of the WTO Declaration on Gender and Trade on Women’s Economic Empowerment, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Trade and Gender Toolbox and the International Trade Centre (ICT) SheTrades programme. GWI affiliates in 54 countries stand ready to work with these initiatives and organisations to advance the status of women through trade and to demonstrate how women positively complement trade agreements, regionally and internationally.

GWI appreciates the complexity of addressing women’s inequality in value chain and trade opportunities yet underscores that trade and gender are two cornerstones for job creation and economic growth. Additionally, the organisation recognises that improving the economic empowerment of women through trade depends on extensive strategic partner networks. To this end, GWI urges Member States and United Nations agencies to collaborate with international non-government organisations. These organisations offer access to vast globalized networks and local partners who understand regional nuances and who can tailor gender responsive trade partnership strategies from community to community. Thereby, increasing women’s confidence to enter the trade markets and probabilities for future success.

Encouraged by the gender mainstreaming into international and local trade negotiations, GWI recognises a noteworthy milestone at the multilateral level, the Buenos Aires Declaration on Gender and Trade on Women’s Economic Empowerment, endorsed by 118 countries in the context of the 11th Ministerial Conference of the WTO in December 2017. The cooperative goal is to increase the participation of women in trade to help them reach their full potential. The Declaration key focus areas aim to construct trade policies that are gender responsive and, in doing so, significantly raise awareness about the link between trade and gender; facilitate WTO Member actions on trade and gender; generate new data on the impact of trade on women; and provide training on these issues to governments and to women entrepreneurs. GWI aligns with the WTO who seeks to build a more inclusive trading world that will allow more women to participate in trade and to reap the economic benefits of global trading; thereby spring boarding them into better economic situations, out of poverty, and increase education opportunities.

¹ World Trade Organisation, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/a4t_e/gr17_e/genderbrochuregr17_e.pdf

Education and economic independence for women and girls is central to GWI's mission which is embodied in the ICT SheTrades initiative. Many GWI members are from developing and least developed countries and have been concerned about the unequal distribution of wealth resulting from some trade practices. GWI members as a whole are inspired by the SheTrades programme and its opportunities. Through the SheTrades app, women entrepreneurs are able to share information about their trade offerings, increase visibility, expand networks, connect and internationalize. SheTrades, which aims to connect one million women entrepreneurs to market by 2021, also helps corporations and organisations to include more women entrepreneurs in their supply chains.²

GWI Bina Roy Partners in Development Programme draws inspiration from SheTrades. As example, GWI affiliates around the world train hundreds of women annually on local livelihood skills training from fruit production to handcrafts to sessions about microfinancing. They have learned how to comply with the local standards for global trading; they have developed sound business practices; and have, therefore, been able to harness the opportunities provided by trade to sell their products locally and worldwide.

GWI unquestioningly supports the UNCTAD Trade and Gender Toolbox designed to help governments ensure that trade empowers women.³ The toolbox is the first attempt to provide a systematic framework to evaluate the impact of trade reforms on women and gender inequalities prior to implementation of those reforms. The tools and the structure of the toolbox can be replicated for assessing the consequences of trade reforms on women for any country, thereby creating tailored programmes adapted to the needs of local women.

Principally, GWI and its affiliates are encouraged by the recent forward-thinking undertakings to increase women in trade. Increasing trade opportunities will empower women to think differently about their situations and futures, and those of their family. Improving a woman's trade opportunity gives her an expertise she can use to craft her own small, family business or start her own local cooperative industry serving local small towns and cities.

Increasing women's economic power is not pink washing as critics have said but results in a positive, multiplier effect on society by increasing living standards for all, building stronger communities for all and therefore reducing poverty for all the ultimate challenge and goal of SDG 1.

Concerning improving women and trade opportunities, GWI recommends the Human Rights Council work together with trade agencies in collaboration with expert non-governmental organisations and civil society to do the following:

- Create a platform for sharing experiences on gender-responsive trade policies and programmes.
- Facilitate the distribution of the best practices and methods for analyzing trade policies and their effects on women and their local economies. Follow such distributions with training.
- Integrate and simplify non-government organisation collaboration regarding women in trade with United Nations mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People.
- Collect gender disaggregated data on trade and disseminate findings.
- Foster collaborative activities and help Member States set up institutional practices to improve gender and trade benchmarks.

While encouraged, GWI remains concerned that young women are often forced, because of lack of opportunity, to leave their small towns, thereby reducing the size of the town's economy, restricting its development and resulting in large cities growing larger. Alternatively, improving women's economic empowerment locally will positively impact the economic growth of their community and help reduce poverty therein.

² International Trade Centre <http://www.intracen.org/itc/women-and-trade/SheTrades/>

³ UNCTAD https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditc2017d1_en.pdf

Creating this interconnected web of women in trade will increase cross-border trade, disrupt the destructive cycle of poverty and foster new ways for women and their communities to grow financially and socially. Alongside, maintaining their ancestor's guiding principles that focus community relationships will hold communities together. Gathering communities together with a common focus and providing citizens the systems and tools to uphold a positive trajectory is crucial to achieving a peaceful world free from poverty.

GWI urges all 193 world leaders who agreed to the SDGs in 2015 to course correct in 2020 with a deeper commitment to achieving the SDGs; one that includes women in trade and trade negotiations. GWI and its 54 country affiliates are committed to this course of action and welcome collaboration.
