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Joint written statement* submitted by International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status, Graduate Women International (GWI), Canadian Federation of University Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Latter-day Saint Charities, 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.

[20 August 2020]

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

Graduate Women International: Distance learning and digital technologies as a strategical and challenging turn towards inclusive access to education for women and girls

Distance learning and digital technologies as a strategical and challenging turn towards inclusive access to education for women and girls

Submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI) with co-sponsors: Canadian Federation of University Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Latter-day Saint Charities, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Women-Graduates USA, and Zonta International.

Today, a world without the Internet is unimaginable, given that the global online penetration rate is 59 percent¹. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is forcing unprecedented school shutdowns worldwide, blocking some 1.6 billion learners at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels from the classroom². The crisis is bringing into light again the significance of education while simultaneously highlighting its vulnerability during global emergencies.

The COVID-19 compulsory social distancing creates more dependency on technology and forces the drastic and widespread adaptation of education methods to digital platforms. Concerningly, in an era of networked societies, COVID-19 school shutdowns are affecting women and girls particularly, putting them at higher risk of dropping out, of losing their fundamental human right to education and of jeopardizing their present and future academic and professional opportunities. As a century-old organisation committed to the advancement of women and girls through lifelong education up to the highest levels, GWI acknowledges the promising possibilities of distance learning as a means towards equal, safe and inclusive access to education for all and especially critical for women and girls. At the same time, however, GWI warns that implementing distance learning necessitates overcoming crucial challenges.

The world is currently witnessing large-scale efforts to implement the use of technology in support of distance learning with a commendable adaptation capacity of educators globally. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes education more flexible and accessible, allowing disenfranchised populations to cross the systemic barriers they face to access quality lifelong education³. Multiple studies have further highlighted the benefits of virtual education from the learner's perspective: e-learning requires 40 to 60% less time to learn than in a traditional classroom. It allows students to work at their own pace and to focus on concepts of interest⁴.

However, without access to the right technology, millions of learners worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the education opportunities offered by distant learning. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, the pandemic has

1 Statista, 2020.

2 "Education: From disruption to recovery", UNESCO website, 2020.

3 Alex Twinomugisha, "The promise and the challenges of virtual schools", World Bank Blogs, 4 October 2019.

4 Cathy Li, Farah Lalani, "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how", World Economic Forum, 29 April 2020.

revealed⁵ first-hand the limitations of such disparity. Reliable and inexpensive connectivity is required, especially in remote places if digital learning is to thrive. GWI stresses the need for governments to ensure that e-learning will not broaden existing digital inequalities and urges them to participate in reducing such imbalances by ensuring equal access to digital tools and skills.

Building back better post-COVID-19 means closing the gap in the technological divide. The use of educational technologies must accompany large-scale enterprises of expanding Internet connectivity. Mobile phones alone are not enough to guarantee digital inclusion. Many online activities, such as job searches, creation of a curriculum, school education for children or training courses for adults, need adequate tools to be carried out.

As the demand for digital skills grows exponentially governments must put into place infrastructure for training across all sectors and all levels of education. Hence, GWI insists on the crucial importance of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 on the power of partnerships: governments must partner with telecom industries to come up with development plans. There is a critical need for closer collaboration between Ministries of Education, education institutions, Ministries responsible for energy and connectivity and digital industries to ensure the sustainability of the distance learning system. GWI calls for education (SDG4) and equality (SDG5) to be put at the heart of all efforts, as quality education will help reduce inequalities within and between countries, communities, and populations (SDG10). Education is essential to advance all 17 SDGs and its necessary shift towards more digitalisation is made evident by the pandemic.

Furthermore, the ongoing pandemic has stressed the vast discrepancy in home e-learning environments and working conditions between men and women. Women working and studying remotely are more likely than men to spend time on housework and care work, preventing them from solely concentrating on work or studies. GWI urges states to ensure decent working conditions to all women and girls.

The provision of decent learning conditions must be completed with a vital follow-up of all students learning remotely. In this sense, GWI states that distance learning should not replace face-to-face lessons, as women and girls are at higher risk of dropping out. Studies build identity and strengthen essential social bonds, which are at the core of integration in societies. Social exchange, discussions with other students and teachers shape critical minds and capacity of adaptation, which are essential to empowering all individuals. Educators are key figures and critical stakeholders in student's empowerment and education process. GWI warns against their being left behind in the attempt to digitalise education, which could also result in a standardisation of thoughts. The solution lies in a blended and flexible approach, combining online and remote resources with classroom training.

Considering the urgent need to include women's and girls' higher education as a critical stake in the response to the current crisis and in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, GWI appeals to the 45th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge Member States to:

- Partner with telecom companies and invest in expanding the Internet network to extend coverage and broadband quality of public WiFi and allow free access in all cities and municipalities and reliable connectivity in remote areas.
- Invest in infrastructure for training staff and students, especially women and girls, to use IT services and digital devices.

⁵ "ICTs to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals", ITU Plenipotentiary Conference 2018 website.

- Partner with higher education institutions to enquire about the possibility for students to follow online classes in decent conditions, and safe and secure environments (access to the Internet, to a personal computer, information about the working environment).
- Dedicate funding to ensure decent learning conditions for all students displaced from their education, especially to women and girls.
- Develop specific supports for educators to enhance their digital instruction skills.⁶
- Partner with private and public sectors to provide the necessary material (computer, digital devices) to those who cannot afford it.
- Ensure e-learning is augmented with digital face-to-face meetings as social exchange and coursework follow-up.
- Encourage women and girls to seize the opportunity of e-learning to undertake higher- level education and training.
- Provide a program of subsidies or bonuses to those in situations of economic difficulty for the acquisition of devices with an Internet connection.
- Ensure that all asylum seekers in reception centres have Internet access and the appropriate devices to achieve this.
- Optimize use of radio and public television as platforms for delivery of education.
- Improve access to electricity in all areas rural and urban.

The pandemic is the largest shock to education in history, and the magnitude of this shock is not yet realised. Without remedial action when students return to school the World Bank estimates a \$10 trillion dollar loss in earnings for the current generation of students.

GWJ unites women graduate voices worldwide; women who are staunch advocates for the empowering potential of education, in-classroom or online. "Education is at the heart of sustainable development. We need education to reduce inequalities...Let's prioritize education as a public good; support it through cooperation, partnerships and financing...in order not to leave anyone behind, we must start with education." António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, at the opening of the First International Day of Education.

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⁶ <https://elearningindustry.com/distance-learning-pedagogy-developing-countries/amp>