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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

## **Statement**

Decades of progress towards women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life are undergoing appalling reversals.

The current pandemic has revealed severe gender, economic, and social inequalities for women and girls. Decades of progress towards women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life are undergoing appalling reversals due to the health and economic hardships imposed by COVID-19. This state of affairs places women at the heart of societal destruction and, in this race against time, they will continue suffering extreme consequences unless governments plan quickly for a post-COVID environment.

Disturbingly compatible with the impacts brought on by COVID-19 are the deep-rooted social, economic, and political patterns that stubbornly persist over time in society. Social and economic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic generate the risk of long-term, catastrophic policy changes that will further impede women's full and effective participation in decision-making roles. Graduate Women International is calling on the Member States to, without further delay, navigate back on track towards advancing the human rights of women and acknowledging the positive impact women have on societies when empowered to participate in decision-making processes fully.

Yet, COVID-19, and its negative impact, is not the sole scapegoat for the reversal of progress for women in public life. Since the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), Member States have defied their groundbreaking commitment to achieve equality for women as defined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), even though 189 Member States adopted it. Let us make no mistake; these 189 Member States agreed to a

comprehensive and ambitious plan that guaranteed women the same decision-making rights as men. No longer would discriminatory laws govern a women's business opportunity, education rights, and career choices. Additionally, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides the basis for realising women's equal access to decision-making in political and public life. However, despite these international agreements, the world is still far from the vision put forth in the BPfA and CEDAW. Clearly, a deliberate reform of the gender-biased, destructive economic, and social policies that thwart women's decision-making in society is needed.

To reform, Member States noticeably need to be reminded of the BPfA passionate declaration calling for governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making and called for governments to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership, which includes accountability.

The United Nations and its Member States bear the obligation to adhere to their 1995 BPfA international commitments to increase women in decision-making roles. Otherwise, their commitments are, to a greater extent shallow programmes. The 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women presents the opportunity for women's organisations worldwide to call Member States back to the table to revisit accountability and to recommit to action at the local, national, and international levels toward increasing women in decision-making roles.

GWI and our co-sponsors also support the energetic 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), notably for this statement, the Agenda's focus on decision-making. We cite for impact references to participation in the

decision-making process, of vulnerable groups, such as women in SDG target 5.5 and SDG target 16.7 that aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform)

In leading the charge for transformative change, GWI emphatically voices our trepidations about the deep-rooted, discriminatory social structures and norms that are the primary barrier to women's voice, influence, and access to decision-making roles. Predominantly patriarchal, the antiquated structures still influence gender behaviours in many countries today, without opposition. GWI wilfully refutes the male-dominated influence. We advocate that when critical mass is gained and strategically oriented, women's collective voice is powerful and broad-based, becoming instrumental to their ability to negotiate transformative change. (Overseas Development Institute).

The above notion in successful practice would be ideal. However, women are still noticeably absent from decision-making positions. In stark contrast to this deficiency, GWI celebrates that women have established thousands of vibrant and visionary organisations that have had considerable success in influencing government policy and developing agencies over the past decades. These courageous activists' led to improved participation of women in decision-making roles and enabled impactful contributions by women to policies and agencies. Likewise, GWI acknowledges the proven influence of women's united voices. We remain vigilant to reclaim the momentum lost by COVID-19, to mobilise women through leadership training and lifelong learning, and to revive Member States who have settled into languorous practices. GWI is trusted to follow up on recommendations made to Member States and UN Women.

To achieve this, GWI appeals to Member States to increase investment in women's education to support decision-making power indirectly. The fact that education is one of the most important investments a country can make in its people is indisputable. Additionally, the importance of education in promoting and sustaining both individual and national development is well documented. Not only is education a powerful agent of change, it is a fundamental human right that also knowingly yields positive impacts on individual, social, economic, and life developments.

Concurrently, GWI recommends that Member States work with women to establish women's organizations in different areas of concern, including decision-making in public life, to bring about the desired benefits for themselves, their children, and their communities.

We further urge the Member States to dedicated resources marked to support women's political leadership not only through traditional and modernised education methods but also through economic programmes. Investing in women's economic assets, their organisations, and their communities with a focus on policy impact and not just elections.

Furthermore, we call upon the United Nations to make the compelling case to its Member States that during this widespread COVID-19 economic disruption, is the time for Member States to invest in political apprenticeships for women to enter decision-making sphere, with the guiding principles that women who develop political skills contribute positively in a range of ways. By underpinning schools and civic associations that aim to improve decision-making skills, potential pathways will ignite for women and societies will benefit, including during post-pandemic recovery.

To sensitise the United Nations about the obstacles women face in decision-making, GWI calls upon its Member States to collaborate with local, problem-driven women's civil society organizations. Local women understand local problems and needed solutions. Targeted teamwork through relevant channels will create opportunities for reform and will divert policy framework from generic gender interventions.

GWI calls for the Member States to maintain gender-based violence safe-centres and hotlines staffed by women, for women who are victims of GBV and also to invest in their recovery. Women, otherwise capable of advancement, are defeated by GBV they lose the opportunity and often hope. This recommendation is precisely relevant given that approximately one in three women throughout the world will experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime and that in over 50 countries, there is no legal protection for women against domestic violence. (World Bank)

GWI requests that Member States engage youth organizations fully to bring in the voices of young people. Such engagement should be formalised but not structured that quick action is restricted.

The need for equal representation of women and men in all decision-making levels goes far deeper than the symbolic ticking of the box. Gender inequality imposes severe limits on women's freedom; it obstructs their access to information and limits their participation in decision-making. Even more important, the full and effective participation and decision-making in public life is a fundamental matter of rights: women and men must be able to participate equally in all spheres of life. They must be equally empowered to voice their opinions and protect their needs.

Founded in 1919, GWI is the leading girls' and women's global organisation advocating for women's rights, equality, and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels.

This statement is co-sponsored by the following non-governmental organisations (NGO) in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC: Soroptimists International and Zonta International; and those in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC: Canadian Federation of University Women, Federación Mexicana de Universitarias, Women Graduates-USA, Inc., Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Women's Federation for World Peace International.