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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, Federación Mexicana de Universitarias, 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.

[31 January 2021]

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

Graduate Women International calls for the increase in domestic funding for education as a means to confront the seismic results of the COVID 19 pandemic on education

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global learning disruption of unprecedented scale and severity and has caused the most significant threat in history to education. A staggering 300 million students are out of school (1). The closure of schools, universities, and other knowledge institutions and the interruption of literacy and lifelong learning programmes have disrupted the lives of an estimated 1.6 billion students globally (2). The pandemic threatens a seismic reversal of the hard-earned gains of 180 million more girls enrolling in primary and secondary school, and a three-fold increase in third-level education since adopting the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago (3). The pandemic is the largest shock to education in history, and the magnitude of the impact may defy measurement. The World Bank report estimates a loss of \$10 trillion dollars in earnings over time for the current generation of students.

Alarming is the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report that estimates that 11 million girls and young women may never return to education. The extraordinary and unprecedented education crisis caused by COVID 19 has led to the aforementioned 1.6 billion students learning being thwarted due to school closures. While Graduate Women International (GWI) hails the vitality of innovative and promising learning methods stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the global education culture shift to digital and distance learning compounds the accessibility of education for those who are already marginalized. The digital divide prevents those farthest behind from accessing online resources to continue education. As example, in Western Europe and North America, at least one in seven students do not have access to the Internet at home. This figure rises to 80% in sub-Saharan Africa and 88% in Least Developed Countries. Unless we take urgent action, more than 24 million children are at risk of dropping out of school.

Given these astounding facts, GWI is duty-bound to submit this statement to the 46th session of the Human Rights Council. The statement aims to heighten awareness about the critical digital learning crisis continuing as pandemic fallout and to motivate Member State's commitment to domestic funding for education, including resources to support teachers. Youth advocates and women in educational sector leadership roles, like the women in the Forum for African Women Educationalists are critical to reimagining education and learning. Post COVID education systems must be more flexible, inclusive and equitable.

Now is the time to place collaboration, international solidarity, and domestic funding for education at the centre of COVID 19 recovery and transformation towards more equal and sustainable societies. Let's be reminded that the right to education is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration calls for free and compulsory elementary education. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, goes further to stipulate that countries shall make higher education accessible to all. What the Declaration and Convention failed to account for is a global health

pandemic that would drastically alter conventional classroom access to education and traditional learning methods, perhaps forever.

GWI members, collaborators and supporters worldwide passionately advocate for the access to education and, together, faithfully promote the positive role education plays building sustainable societies. Accompanying this work, GWI also voices deep concerns about the disturbing inequalities in education exacerbated globally by the COVID 19 pandemic, especially the digital divide affecting women and girls and the inadequate domestic funding for education.

Appropriately, the 2021 International Day of Education undertook the theme 'Recover and Revitalise Education for the COVID 19 Generation'. As a century-old organisation committed to lifelong education rights, GWI acknowledges the promising possibilities of distance learning as a means towards equal and inclusive access to education that is critical for women and girls. However, we insist that if the education sector is to fully "recover and revitalise", inequalities emerging in digital education must be addressed now rather than waiting for a post-COVID 19 world. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, building back "recovered and revitalised" post-COVID-19 requires governments to invest in large-scale infrastructure to enable connectivity.

Therefore, GWI is building on recommendations from its 45th session of the Human Rights Council written statement, 'Distance learning and digital technologies as a strategical and challenging turn towards inclusive access to education for women and girls'. We call for worldwide action from governments, the private and public sectors, institutes of learning, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society to increase commitments and undertakings to reduce the digital divide. This will require significant investment in building new structures to ensure technology improves teaching and learning. Digital technology offers great potential for education but at the same time as accessibility and resources are being developed, governments should ensure that women and girls are educated and supported through utilizing and expanding traditional teaching tools and established low-cost technology.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda and its centrepiece, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), call for transforming how societies interact with the planet and each other. This transformation requires new technologies, new ways of structuring societies and economies and, above all else, innovative and equal educational opportunities. The GWI international network of graduate women is brought together by one core belief: that every woman and girl have the right to equal access to education in all domains and at the highest levels. We advocate for education as both a fundamental human right and a key enabler to achieving economic growth and sustainable development.

GWI insists on the crucial importance of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 namely the power of partnerships. Governments are urged to partner with telecom industries, to collaborate with the Ministries of

Education and Energy, NGOs, educational institutions and teachers to identify local requirements and domestic funding partners to reduce the digital divide. At the heart of partnerships must be the intersecting commitment to SDG 4 (education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), alongside SDG 10 (reduce inequalities). GWI is focused on being part of the solution to overcome the digital divide in education and we endorse United Nations General Assembly, President, H.E. Volkan Bozkir's, statement that, "The COVID 19 pandemic has taught us that we need to urgently re-imagine and invest in education if we are to achieve the targets of SDG 4".

We urge the Human Rights Council action to:

- Uphold education as human right, including for those in refugee camps.
- Promote data analysis and monitoring of learning.
- Facilitate coordination of United Nations education initiatives.

We call on member states to:

- Increase domestic funding for education and protect education budgets.
- Optimize use of cell phones, radio and public television as platforms for delivery of education.
- Partner with telecom companies and invest in expanding Internet networks to extend coverage and broadband quality of public WiFi; allow reliable free access in all cities, municipalities and remote areas.
- Participate in global coalitions for education.
- Engage in United Nations education initiatives.
- Invest in infrastructure for training staff and students, especially women and girls, to use IT services and digital devices.
- Partner with local education institutions to enable students to participate in online classes in and safe, secure environments.
- Develop specific training systems for educators to enhance their digital instruction skills. (4)
- Partner with private and public sectors to provide hardware (computer, digital devices) to those in low-income bracket.
- Ensure e-learning is augmented with digital fa-to-face meetings as social exchange and coursework follow-up.
- Encourage women and girls to seize e-learning opportunity to undertake higher-level education and training.
- Provide incentives programme to those in situations of economic difficulty for the acquisition of devices with Internet connection.

- Ensure that all asylum seekers in reception centres have Internet access and the appropriate devices to achieve this.
- Improve access to electricity in all areas.

This statement is submitted on behalf of Graduate Women International members worldwide and its affiliates, who are also in Special Consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the Canadian Federation of University Women, Federacion Mexicana de Universitarias, and Women Graduates – USA.

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1. <https://en.unesco.org/news/290-million-students-out-school-due-covid-19-unesco-releases-first-global-numbers-and-mobilizes>
 2. UNESCO Policy Brief: Education During COVID 19 and Beyond, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf
 3. <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-report-illustrates-leap-forward-girls-education-over-past-25-years-now-threatened-1>
 4. <https://elearningindustry.com/distance-learning-pedagogy-developing-countries/amp>