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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 Soroptimist  
International, Women's Federation for World Peace  
International, non-governmental organizations in general  
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Canadian Federation of University Women, Federación  
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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 May 2021]

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

## **The Civil Society Shrinking Space Paradox: “The United Nations simply could not do its work without the active engagement of civil society”, Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres**

“Civil society” emerged as a popular term in the 1980s when the label became identified with non-state movements that aimed to defy political systems repressive to societies. The goals of the movements were to change the course of government policy (World Bank). The United Nations and its agencies incorporate the term civil society into their work and highlight the benefits of creating and maintaining an enabling environment for civil society. [1] Civil society participation at the United Nations is a right. Its value is regularly reiterated in United Nations resolutions and mechanisms.

Yet, the United Nations and governments worldwide have recently used security policies and the COVID-19 pandemic to curb the role of civil society and accelerate the trend of shrinking their space. Further, the largest reduction in girls’ opportunities for education in history is now being realised. As the global community continues to face the unprecedented public health, economic, social, and education challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society’s role in turning the tide is more crucial than ever.

A civil society organisation (CSO), also referred to as non-governmental organisation (NGO), is defined by the United Nations as any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national, or international level. Other definitions collectively refer to civil society as the space for cooperative action around shared interests, purposes, and values, generally distinct from government and commercial for-profit actors.

Civil society is worldwide and is not limited to NGOs. Civil society encompasses community-based groups, women’s organisations, indigenous peoples’ organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, social movements, coalitions, and a wide range of advocacy groups. More than 1’500 NGOs are in formal association with the United Nations Department of Global Communications, facilitating the United Nations valuable links to people and organisations around the world.[2]

As a leading NGO advocating for women and girls’ right to education, Graduate Women International (GWI) raises grave concerns regarding this attempt to neutralise criticism from NGOs; a shift that is causing the dramatic reduction in the participation of women in United Nations mechanisms. GWI warns that, by silencing civil society, the United Nations and governments are directly and unjustly silencing the millions of individuals, communities, and minorities CSOs represent.

NGOs’ right to access and participation in United Nations mechanisms and processes was first acknowledged in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, which names the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as the body to develop ‘suitable arrangements for consultation’ with NGOs.[3] ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and NGOs, is the most recent resolution to define such arrangements. The resolution speaks to an ‘evolving relationship’ between NGOs and the United Nations. It acknowledges ‘the breadth of non-governmental organisations’ expertise and the capacity of NGOs to support the work of the United Nations”. [4]

Recalling that in its thirty-second session, the Human Rights Council noted the important role of civil society at the local, national, regional, and international levels, that civil society facilitates the achievement of the purposes and principles of the United Nations, and that the restriction of civil society space therefore has a negative impact upon their achievement. [5]

Recalling further the United Nations’ Secretary-General’s call to action issued to the Human Rights Council in February 2020, “We are ramping up our efforts for more systematic inclusion of civil society voices in United Nations bodies and agencies, with special attention to women’s rights organisations and young people. [6]

GWI is alarmed about the impact of the systematic assault on civil society space. This shrinking civil society space is triggering increased challenges for like-missioned NGOs who advocate for women and girls' rights. This space reduction tends to increase layers of difficulty for women and girls based on anti-gender discourse. Local civil society is on the frontline often recounting instances of organisations forced to disband, relocate, or change activities, and unable to secure funding. NGOs cannot be side-lined.

NGOs have emerged as a major force in international development in the past few decades and play multiple roles in advancing the rights of women and girls. NGOs are an essential source for positive change and a broker of expert, local information for both societies and governments. GWI aims to keep civil society space fluid and open; to collaborate with other NGOs to hold governments accountable for trying to systematically shutdown NGOs; and to engage in advocacy and offer alternative solutions when solutions fail to support women and girls adequately.

The closure of civil society space has serious implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are the centrepiece for the development of women and girls. For example, as part of SDG 16, governments and other development actors commit to building 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels' and promise to 'ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements'. [7] In addition, under SDG 17, one target is to 'encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships'. [8] The closure of civic space plays a critical role in advocating for the achievement of the remaining SDGs. GWI is exceptionally tuned to the success of SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality).

GWI reminds member states of the report by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association to the forty-first session of the Human Rights Council, that presents a non-exhaustive list of practical recommendations with the hope that all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the SDGs will find this tool useful as a guide to optimize civil society's participation in achieving the 2030 Agenda. [9] GWI encourages the Human Rights Council and member states to reacquaint themselves with said list.

Shrinking civil society space matters and the global emergency of how to reclaim it is real. Civil society amasses and amplifies voices of those who would otherwise not be heard. GWI as 101-year NGO, has long proven its significance in advocating for the advancement of women and girls through education and has reaffirmed its continuing dedication to engage with the United Nations and its member states. The United Nations cannot exist in isolation without civil society. GWI recommends the United Nations and its agencies circle back to its own narrative that claims to embrace civil society. GWI's intent is not to name and shame but to reverse the flow towards a more inclusive civil society. GWI further recommends the Human Rights Council address the following wide-ranging areas as a beginning to improving civil society space within its systems:

1. NGO funding, invest in the capabilities of civil society
2. Digital support systems, increase focus on infrastructure and digital access
3. Facilitate mutually beneficial, trustworthy collaboration, partnerships and relationships between civil society and member states.
4. Research, develop, implement and follow up on support mechanisms
5. Endorse civil society social movements as a means to improve humanity

- [1] United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/32/20, Practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society, based on good practices and lessons learned
- [2] United Nations and Civil Society Unit
- [3] United Nations Charter, Article X,
- [4] ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, page 1
- [5] United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/32/20/L29
- [6] Secretary-General's remarks to the UN Human Rights Council: "The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights", February 2020
- [7] Sustainable Development Goal 16, target 16.10
- [8] Sustainable Development Goal 17, target 17.17
- [9] United Nations, Human Rights Council, A/HRC/41/41/Add.2