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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 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.

[21 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

Reducing indigenous peoples' inequalities is through State's provision of safe access to quality, cultural-based, language-appropriate education programmes

Graduate Women International (GWI) recognises the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) [1], adopted 15 years ago by most States, as the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples. Considering the UNDRIP and that there are an estimated 476 million indigenous people spanning 90 countries and speaking an overwhelming majority of the world's estimated 7,000 languages and representing 5,000 different cultures [2], GWI submits this written statement to the 51st session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) as a respectful and urgent call for States to renew and rebuild their commitment to the UNDRIP that obliges them to take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions [3], including education. GWI, a global network of advocates for women and girls' education rights for 103 years, is primarily aligned with the right to safe access to child-centered, holistic, culture-appropriate, digitally accessible education programmes that improve future economic and social conditions.

Acknowledging that the UNDRIP establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of the world's indigenous peoples [4], GWI reminds the HRC and States that the UNDRIP specifically addresses the right to education, health, employment, language, and other rights individually, collectively, and culturally. The UNDRIP forbids discrimination against indigenous peoples yet inequalities in education, healthcare, and technology access persist, among others. The gap between the rights provided for in the UNDRIP and its implementation at the national level, particularly regarding the rights of indigenous children persists [5]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these pre-existing structural inequalities and systemic racism were clearly exposed and exacerbated.[6]

Recalling the Interactive Dialog with the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) at the HRC 48th session, GWI expresses concern that groups at particular risk, such as indigenous children, persons with disabilities, women, and elders were exceptionally affected during the pandemic. Numerous reports attest to the disproportionate, negative impact on indigenous peoples globally, creating the urgent need to revitalize support of indigenous peoples at the HRC and other United Nations fora. [7] GWI makes special mention of the EMRIP Chair-Rapporteur 2021 report that stressed ongoing challenges for EMRIP due to is the lack of responses from States to mission requests. GWI would like to see more effective and impactful communication between States, EMRIP, and with the participation of nongovernmental organisations like GWI who are often more in touch locally with indigenous peoples areas of concern.

Underscoring that the most effective way to reduce inequalities realised by indigenous peoples by providing the provision of safe access to quality, cultural-based, language-appropriate education. GWI believes that education is a precondition for empowerment, inclusion, and economic success and that States and the HRC have an obligation to acknowledge and eliminate the barriers obstructing education. Yet, concerningly, evidence indicates that indigenous children have lower access to such programmes than their non-indigenous counterparts.[8]

Nevertheless, GWI acknowledges State's efforts to improve education for indigenous children. Conversely, various barriers depending on geo-region and individual situations continue to impact indigenous children's, especially girls, participation in school. Chief among the barriers is the fact that formal education programmes often disregard indigenous language and culture.

To this point, GWI calls attention to UNDRIP article 14 [9] which confirms the collective rights to education of indigenous peoples, including the establishment and control over educational systems and institutions, using culturally appropriate methods, in their own languages, without discrimination. We urge States to recharge article 14, being mindful of the positive impact indigenous women and girls make on societies and economies [10] when they have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue or other understood language. States should recognise that alienation from culture and language increases mental, physical, and spiritual trauma and reduces positive contributions to the community.

Likewise, the resulting devaluation of indigenous cultures and low societal status sustains the discrimination faced by indigenous women and girls, leading to school dropouts. If their cultures are continually treated as secondary, the indigenous identity unjustly continues to be stigmatised. As part of its 2022 Renew and Rebuild Programme, GWI aims to work with States and other international organisations to reverse this outdated and destructive trend.

The challenges mentioned above only touch the surface of barriers that obstruct indigenous girls' education. They face additional barriers to education, such as lack of access to sanitary products and building infrastructure, often resulting in dropping out of school. The lack of security further hinders indigenous girls living in remote areas. On their long journeys to and from school they risk abduction, rape, trafficking, and other forms of violence. Provably, indigenous children are at a higher risk of violence than non-indigenous children, owing to conditions such as poverty and migration, leaving them at risk of sexual exploitation. [11] Cultural-based norms and traditions play a key role in keeping indigenous girls out of education in many parts of the world. These norms and practices include early marriage, female genital mutilation, and an unequal division of domestic labour. Yet, if States live up to their UNDRIP obligation and follow through with targeted programmes, indigenous women and girls could be productive, contributing members of society.

Bearing in mind the points mentioned, GWI urges States to recognise that unequal access to safe, quality, and culturally-appropriate education violates multiple articles of the UNDRIP, namely article 13 on the right of indigenous people to transmit their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature to future generations; article 14 on the right to establish and control their own educational system, to all levels and forms of education, and to education in their own culture and language; and article 15 on the right of indigenous people to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories, and aspirations to be reflected in education. Furthermore, it violates article 44, which states that all rights guaranteed by the declaration are to be enjoyed equally by men and women that today includes the right to digital education. [12]

The digital environment has become an essential part of children's lives worldwide, including their education. Many reports show that indigenous children have less reliable access, or no access at all, to digital education which States must realise means that indigenous children have had no access to schooling since the start of the pandemic lockdown measures in 2020. Indigenous children with disabilities have faced more significant barriers. Indigenous students and teachers report challenges related to Internet access, not having a computer at home, or traveling to get a signal to do schoolwork on a mobile phone, and schoolwork that is often not provided in an understandable language. However, the consequences of the education gap reach far beyond obstructing the full enjoyment of rights relating to e-schooling. Of serious concern to GWI regarding the digital education gap is that States are knowingly leaving behind generations of indigenous women and girls and that their future economic empowerment is being critically hindered. There is no more time. States must find compassion for these disparities in e-learning and increase political will to help indigenous students access digital learning.

Due to indigenous peoples' astute engagement in drafting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), many of the 17 SDGs and targets are relevant to indigenous peoples and have direct linkages to UNDRIP. Two SDG targets specifically refer to indigenous peoples. Goal 2.3 on agricultural output of indigenous small-scale farmers and Goal 4.5 to ensure

the equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for indigenous peoples are part of measuring the implementation of the 17 SDGs. [13]

Bearing in mind that child-centered, holistic, culture-appropriate, digitally accessible education programmes are crucial to compliance with the UNDRIP, GWI makes the following, albeit far from a complete list, of recommendations that bear longer-term, positive results for indigenous women and girls:

- Ensure access to language and culture-appropriate education programmes.
- Ensure access for all ages to digital schooling and vocational training.
- Include indigenous women and girls and their community and government leadership.
- Ensure access to sanitary products and toilet facilities in every school.
- Teach the UNDRIP globally to increase awareness of indigenous rights and tolerance.
- Collect, analyse, and take action on disaggregated data on women and girls.
- Enlist the collaboration of nongovernmental organisations like GWI who are subject matter experts.
- Ensure a safe environment for all indigenous human rights and youth defenders.
- Include in COVID-19 recovery plans provisions for the physical, mental and spiritual health; education and protection of all indigenous peoples.

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1. UNDRIP un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html
 2. World Health Organisation who.int/news-room/events/detail/2022/08/09/default-calendar/international-day-of-the-world-s-indigenous-peoples
 3. UNDRIP, Article 21
 4. UNDRIP, Article 43
 5. EMRIP documents-dds-
ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/219/79/PDF/G2121979.pdf?OpenElement
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. OECD (2017), Promising Practices in Supporting Success for indigenous Students, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en>.
 9. UNDRIP, Article 14
 10. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN fao.org/zhc/detail-events/en/c/1028010/
 11. EMRIP
 12. UNDRIP Articles 13.1, 14.1.2.3, 15.1 and 44
 13. un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/focus-areas/post-2015-agenda/the-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-and-indigenous.html