

Graduate Women International (GWI) written statement to the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Title: Promising possibilities of increased Internet usage and distance learning with consideration that implementing distance learning necessitates overcoming crucial innovation and technological challenges to advancing the status of women and girls

This statement is presented by Graduate Women International (GWI) on behalf of its members in 49 countries, statement cosponsoring nongovernmental organisations, and our commitment to advancing the status of women and girls through the safe access to quality education and lifelong training up to the highest levels, including digital education and innovation.

New data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs), indicates substantial increase in global growth in Internet use, with the estimated number of people who have used the Internet surging to 4.9 billion in 2021, from an estimated 4.1 billion in 2019. While these are positive findings for global development, the ITU data also confirms that the ability to connect remains profoundly unequal. Of the 2.9 billion still offline, an estimated 96 percent live in developing countries. (ITU).

Notably, among the 4.9 billion considered 'Internet users', hundreds of millions have intermittent online access via shared devices or using connectivity speeds that significantly limit the value of their connection and reduce the chance to complete a task. Clearly, innovation and technological improvements are urgently needed to increase the probability of achieving gender equality and education rights for all women and girls.

As a 100-year organisation committed to advancing women and girls through safe access to quality education and lifelong learning up to the highest levels, GWI acknowledges the promising possibilities of increased Internet usage and distance learning. We support Member States committed to the Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education (GDCE) through the UNESCO ReWirEd campaign. We commend that the campaign is centred around the most marginalized and framed by two interrelated challenges. First, technical and material access to connectivity remain woefully insufficient with approximately two out of every three children and youth having no internet access at home. Second, capacity gaps remain a persistent obstacle to connected education. (Rewired GDCE). Inadequate digital skills and competencies rank as the single most significant barrier to technology use for education, regardless of a country's development status. (Rewired GDCE). At the same time, GWI warns that implementing distance learning necessitates overcoming crucial challenges.

Recalling that with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, government, education leaders, and employers were forced to quickly deploy immense efforts to ensure the continuity. As the pandemic raged on in 2020, and 2021, and now as 2022 nears its end, education systems and distance learning have been forever transformed. The world of work is forever changed. The prolonged challenge of addressing learning losses, training teachers for effective digital teaching, and managing hybrid environments is the new reality.

Recalling our 45th Human Rights Council (HRC 45) written statement, GWI stressed that the COVID-19 compulsory social distancing was creating more dependency on technology and digital platforms. GWI reiterates in this CSW 67 statement that increased dependence on digital technology and hybrid environments affects women and girls predominantly, 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.

To this point, GWI acknowledges that the world is currently witnessing large-scale efforts to implement the use of innovation and technology in support of distance learning and employment with a commendable adaptation capacity of educators and employers globally. As the demand for digital skills grows exponentially, governments must harness innovation and implement 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 improve 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 (SDG 4) and equality (SDG 5) to be put at the heart of all efforts, as quality education will help reduce inequalities within and between countries, communities, and populations (SDG 10). Education is essential to advance all 17 SDGs, and its necessary shift towards more digitalisation is made evident by the pandemic.

Noting the United Nations, Scaling-Up Digital Learning and Skills to Accelerate Progress Towards SDG 4 report, and upholding that digital learning and skills training requires a targeted approach, GWI commends E9 Member States (six, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan being GWI national affiliates) for their long-standing history of partnership and collaboration that offer a catalyst to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills training. GWI calls on Member States to take note of the E9 partnership as a best practice and encourage similar partnerships as targeted by SDG 17.

Recalling its HRC 49 session written statement, GWI stresses the need for governments to replicate good practices and 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.

However, without access to the right technology, millions of learners, and workers worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the educational and work opportunities offered in the online environment. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet, the post-pandemic world is still revealing first-hand the limitations of such disparity. Reliable and inexpensive connectivity is required, especially in remote places if digital learning is to thrive.

The provision of decent learning conditions must include vital follow-up of all students learning remotely. In this sense, as stated in its written statement to the HRC 49, GWI states that distance learning should not entirely replace face-to-face lessons, as women and girls are at higher risk of dropping out. School attendance builds identity and strengthens essential social skills, which are at the core of integration in societies. Social exchanges shape critical minds, which is essential to empowering all individuals.

Educators are vital figures and critical stakeholders in students' empowerment. GWI warns against educators being left behind in the attempt to digitalise education too fast. The solution is a blended and flexible approach, combining online and remote resources with classroom training.

Considering the urgent need to include women's and girls' education and lifelong training as a way to achieve gender equality through innovation and technology advancements, GWI asks the CSW 67 session to urge Member States to:

1. Partner with telecom companies and invest in expanding the Internet network to extend coverage and broadband quality of public Wi-Fi and allow free access in all cities and municipalities and reliable connectivity in remote areas.
2. Invest in infrastructure for training staff and students, especially women and girls, to use IT services and digital devices.
3. 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, and information about the working environment).
4. Increase their commitments to domestic funding for education especially in the areas of digital learning to ensure decent learning conditions for all students displaced from their education, especially for women and girls. Develop specific supports for educators to enhance their digital instruction skills.
5. Partner with private and public sectors to provide the necessary material (computer, digital devices) to those who cannot afford it.
6. Ensure e-learning is augmented with digital face-to-face meetings as social exchange and coursework follow-up.
7. Encourage women and girls to seize the opportunity of e-learning to undertake higher-level education and training.
8. Provide a program of subsidies or bonuses to those in situations of economic difficulty for the acquisition of devices with an Internet connection.
9. Ensure that all asylum seekers in reception centres have Internet access and the appropriate devices to achieve this.
10. Optimize use of radio and public television as platforms for delivery of education.
11. Improve access to electricity in all areas rural and urban.
12. Expand investments in free and high-quality digital education content. (GDCE principle)
13. Move education to digital spaces through pedagogical innovation and change. (GDCE principle)

GWII sees the promising possibilities of distance learning as a means towards equal, safe, and inclusive access to education for women and girls. At the same time, however, GWII urges new innovative thinking, implementation, and commitment to funding for safe access to quality distance learning that is equitable for all people.