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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.

[23 August 2023]

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

Graduate Women International (GWI) and Statement Cosponsors Call on States to Harness Sport's Potential and Positive Impact on Women and Girls Education

Cosponsoring NGOs in General status to ECOSOC: International Council of Women, Soroptimist International, Zonta International, Women's Federation for World Peace International, and NGOs in Special Consultative status to ECOSOC: Australian Graduate Women Inc, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Latter-day Saints, Mother's Legacy Project, Women Graduates-USA, Widows Rights International; and Women's United Nations Report Network

In today's intricate global context, marked by various challenges such as conflicts, discrimination, hate speech, socioeconomic conditions, and the ongoing recovery of the education system post-COVID, finding common ground to advance education opportunities for women and girls seems challenging. Amidst this complexity, Graduate Women International (GWI) is optimistic about the potential of women and girls' participation in sports to serve as a bridge. GWI is the leading international network of university women, founded 104 years ago to advance the status of women and girls through education.

When integrated without bias into education systems, sports motivate girls to embrace learning and, as women, to confidently approach professions and leadership roles. Additionally, sports empower them to challenge gender stereotypes and cultural norms that would otherwise limit their potential. Alternatively, GWI notes with concern that significant challenges such as gender-based violence, cultural barriers, and lack of access to sports equipment and facilities also need to be addressed to fully harness the positive impact of sports on girls' education.

That said, GWI calls attention to the intersectionality between various United Nations (UN) resolutions, mechanisms, and treaties that exemplify sport's positive impact on education. For instance, education and sport are intricately linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1] and their successful implementation, as the SDGs provide a framework for utilizing education and sport as practical tools for driving positive change.

GWI specifically urges States to reaffirm their commitment to SDG 4, which aims to provide inclusive and equitable quality education[2], aligning with the transformative potential of integrating sports into curricula. This incorporation not only enriches the learning environment for girls but also nurtures their physical and cognitive health. GWI notes that SDG 5 strives for gender equality and empowerment[3], while the integration of sports and education reduces inequalities by breaking down barriers and advancing SDG 5 goal of equality.

Furthermore, GWI underscores the importance of States committing to SDG 3, highlighting the significance of physical activity and sports in improving physical and mental health[4]. In addition, sport is vital in promoting conflict resolution, which is linked to peace, justice, and strong institutions as defined by SDG 16 [5]. To achieve the cross-cutting impact of sport and education across SDGs, collaboration among States, educational institutions, sports organisations, governments, and NGOs, as highlighted in SDG 17[6], is essential.

GWI stresses that States must familiarise themselves with the principles of UNESCO's International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity, and Sport[7], according to GWI. The Charter promotes physical education and sports worldwide and emphasises the significance of integrating these activities into formal educational systems. This ensures that learners, especially girls, can benefit from physical education programs essential for their social development. GWI urges States to prioritize the implementation of these principles for the betterment of their communities.

Further connecting sport and education to UN mechanisms, it is important to note nearly 400 GWI members, then the International Federation of University Women, travelled to Beijing, China, in 1995 to participate in the Fourth World Conference for Women. Many took leadership roles in committees and played critical roles as liaisons to some 4,000 media representatives. The resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) is a testament to the vision and determination of the 17,000 government delegates and non-governmental organisations who recognised collectively the transformative power of sports in challenging gender stereotypes, promoting women and girls' empowerment, and advancing gender equality.

GWI emphasizes that the BPfA rightly urges States to eliminate obstacles restricting girls' sports access. States should be reminded that the BPfA boldly calls for removing barriers that limit girls' access to sports. GWI notably directs the State's attention to Section 107, Paragraph F[8], to create and support programs in the educational system, in the workplace, and in the community to make opportunities to participate in sports, physical activity, and recreation available to girls and women of all ages on the same basis as they are made available to men and boys.

GWI underscores the crucial role of sports in promoting women's and girls' physical and mental well-being. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)[9], which stresses holistic development encompassing physical activity and education, GWI calls for States to reaffirm their commitment to CRC's Article 31[10], recognizing the right to leisure and sports activities. It is imperative to recall that this right extends to all children, including those with disabilities, as outlined in the CRC ratified by 196 countries globally. GWI also reminds States to adhere to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which highlights the right of individuals with disabilities to participate in recreational and sports activities equally with others[11].

GWI respectfully recognises the robust linkage between the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[12] and women and girls' education yet underscores with concern that CEDAW does not explicitly mention "women and girls in sport" as a standalone term in any of its articles or the advantage of sport. Having been ratified by 189[13] States, GWI urges CEDAW to bolster political commitment to include as such.

Sports, with their emphasis on fair competition and cooperation, foster an inclusive environment empowering women and girls to thrive, setting a gender equity precedent beyond sports. As they achieve recognition in sports, barriers to education and careers crumble, making sports a catalyst for change and promoting gender equity in education. GWI calls on States to acknowledge the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace on 6 April as a chance to celebrate sport's transformative potential globally.

GWI aims to motivate States to increase support and funding for women and girls in sport by highlighting examples of remarkable role models. Cathy Freeman's victory in the 400 meters race at the 2000 Sydney Olympics was a significant moment for Australia, symbolizing unity, and reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians[14]. Team Rwanda Cycling comprised of women from different ethnic backgrounds achieved international success while promoting healing and coexistence in a country scarred by the 1994 genocide[15]. South African runner Caster Semenya has become a symbol of resilience and unity, advocating for gender and human[16]. These examples illustrate how women in sports can unite nations by transcending borders, cultures, and backgrounds and contributing to societal progress. GWI applauds the UN Plan of Action for Sports: The Game Plan[17], which focuses on identifying and reporting hate speech and actions individuals and famous athletes have taken to counter it.

After demonstrating the positive impact of sport and education for women and girls, GWI urges States to:

Incorporate sports into educational curricula to promote physical and mental well-being.

Provide gender-sensitive coaching and training to educators and coaches.

Invest in sports facilities and programs, particularly in underserved communities.

Promote women in leadership roles in sports, such as through mandatory feminization plans in sports federations, as done in France[18].

Support and elevate women athletes alongside men, like establishing a sports equality fund similar to that in Scotland[19].

Strengthen legislation prohibiting gender violence, threats and harassment and ensure its respect, including in sports.

Ensure women athletes access successful careers, including through enhanced sponsorships and partnerships.

Enhance school sports education for equal opportunities by forging sustainable partnerships among sports organisations, schools, and national federations.

Incorporate marginalized groups in sports, including refugees and people with disabilities.

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1. <https://sdgs.un.org/>
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