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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.

[24 May 2024]

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

Graduate Women International (GWI) Concrete Solutions to Bridge the Gender Digital Divide in Education

At the 56th Human Rights Council (HRC) session, Graduate Women International (GWI) reaffirms its dedication to promoting digital learning and access to digital resources, as emphasized in three previous HRC statements. Recognizing education as the cornerstone of equality, GWI highlights its critical role in achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education equips women and girls with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to participate in society and tackle global challenges like poverty, hunger, health, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Ensuring equitable access to education for women and girls is essential for human rights, sustainable development, and social progress.

GWI reaffirms its commitment to quality, inclusive digital education access emphasized in previous HRC statements, including HRC52 [1], which emphasizes gender equality through equitable access to lifelong learning, and HRC49 [2], highlighting the urgent need for safe, quality digital education for women, girls, and intersecting identities post-COVID-19. Further, HRC45 [3] underscores the transformative potential of digital technologies in addressing educational inequities, advocating for inclusive access to education for women and girls.

In today's rapidly evolving digital education landscape, a gender-sensitive digital transition is paramount to ensure women and girls can benefit from digital education. Introducing initiatives that promote digital literacy and normalize the use of information and communication technology can create an environment where these fields become more accessible to historically underrepresented groups, such as women and girls. Moreover, digitalization provides novel educational opportunities. For instance, GWI urges the HRC to recall the "UNESCO Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning," which highlights the potential of mobile technologies to improve access to quality education, especially in marginalized communities. [4] These guidelines stress the importance of leveraging digital technologies to address educational challenges and promote lifelong learning that aligns with GWI's 105-year mission.

Additionally, GWI recalls the United Nations HRC Resolution 38/5 on accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts and the Internet's promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights, which underscores the importance of bridging the gender digital divide. [5] Addressing digital disparities is crucial for ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities that empower women and girls to participate in education and benefit from digital learning resources fully. Further, this promotes equal opportunities for girls to acquire information and communications technology (ICT) skills, pursue STEM fields, and access online educational content, such as Open Educational Resources (OERs).

OERs are essential resources for women who lack the means to participate in traditional education. These publicly accessible, no-cost teaching and research materials offer significant flexibility, accommodating women's unique needs and responsibilities, such as caregiving or household chores. The digitalization of education and the availability of these OERs present new educational opportunities for women and girls, highlighting the need to bridge the gender digital divide to ensure universal access.

Indeed, OERs improve access to education, creating more opportunities, especially for marginalized groups, directly advancing SDG4. By removing barriers to education, OERs facilitate enrollment and retention rates, further promoting gender equality and reducing overall inequalities (SDG1) by ensuring individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, have access to the same educational opportunities. Moreover, GWI asks that the HRC consider that using these resources promotes inclusive growth (SDG9) and responsible consumption and production (SDG12) by facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and resources while minimizing environmental impact. They also contribute to social cohesion and

collaboration (SDG17) by democratizing access to education and empowering individuals to participate in societal development actively. Finally, by providing knowledge and skills for peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution as is the aim of SDG16.

To address the afore-stated imperative of bridging the gender digital divide, GWI encourages the HRC to recall their commitment to collaborative efforts, which are the foundation for closing the gap. Public-private partnerships with telecom companies, for instance, are crucial in providing necessary materials, such as digital devices and services, to women and girls who cannot afford them since ensuring the affordability and accessibility of OERs contributes heavily to bridging the digital divide. Specifically, internet coverage and broadband quality must be enhanced to ensure free access to high-quality Internet in all areas, including cities, municipalities, and rural regions, thereby enhancing digital access for all, particularly in underserved areas where women and girls may face additional barriers to connectivity. Additionally, economic barriers constitute significant hindrances to digital connectivity. GWI urges the member states to offer subsidies and financial aid for those facing economic difficulties, ensuring universal access to educational opportunities.

Furthermore, GWI stresses the critical importance of enhancing educators' digital literacy and instructional skills for effective online education delivery, aligning with the imperative of improving access to OERs. Empowering educators with tailored support equips them with the tools and expertise necessary to enhance the quality of online learning experiences, increasing student engagement and success. Alongside this, it is paramount to offer gender sensitization training for teachers to reduce biases regardless of their backgrounds. This training should, at the least, address gender biases and stereotypes, promote gender-inclusive teaching practices, and provide strategies for addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment in classrooms. By equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to challenge gender norms, member states will offer a more supportive and empowering educational atmosphere, advancing gender equality in education and society at large, which aligns with the following recommendations:

GWI urges member states to:

- Encourage women and girls to pursue higher-level education and training opportunities through e-learning. Women and girls can access new opportunities and contribute to their communities and economies by promoting lifelong learning and professional development.
- Develop specific supports for educators to ensure effective delivery of online education. Empowering educators with the tools and training they need will improve the quality of online learning experiences and promote student engagement and success.
- Partner with higher education institutions to facilitate online classes for students in safe and secure environments, with access to necessary resources. This collaboration ensures that women and girls have equitable access to quality education, regardless of their geographical location or socioeconomic status.
- Member states should collaborate with telecom companies to expand Internet coverage and improve broadband quality, ensuring free access in all cities, municipalities, and remote areas. This partnership will enhance digital access for all, particularly in underserved areas where women and girls may face additional barriers to connectivity.
- Member states should prioritize gender sensitization training for teachers to encourage an inclusive learning environment that promotes gender equality and empowers all students, regardless of gender identity. This training should encompass awareness of gender biases and stereotypes, strategies for promoting gender-inclusive teaching practices, and techniques for addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment in the classroom. By equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to recognize and challenge gender norms, member states can create a more supportive and empowering educational experience for all

students, ultimately contributing to the advancement of women and girls in education and society.

- Partner with private and public sectors to provide necessary hardware, such as computers and digital devices, to those who cannot afford them. Access to digital devices is essential for participation in online education, and ensuring affordability and availability will bridge the digital divide.
- Provide subsidies or grants to individuals facing economic difficulties in acquiring devices with Internet connectivity. Grantee must also be held accountable and provide required reporting.
- Ensure authorized asylum seekers have access in common areas to the Internet and appropriate devices to facilitate their education and integration.

In conclusion, GWI reiterates its unwavering commitment to advancing women and girls' equality through inclusive digital education access, as reaffirmed in this statement. By recognizing the potential of digital technologies in addressing educational inequities, promoting lifelong learning, and empowering women and girls worldwide, GWI underscores the imperative of collaborative efforts between governments, private sectors, and civil society. Through targeted initiatives to enhance digital literacy, ensure access to OERs, expand Internet coverage, and provide necessary resources, GWI can help the HRC bridge the gender digital divide, creating a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape for women and girls throughout their lifetime. GWI stands ready to mobilize international network of graduate women to assist in implementing all recommendations.

1 GWI HRC52 written statement (February 2023)

2 GWI HRC49 written statement (February 2022)

3 GWI HRC45 written statement (August 2020)

4 2023 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report

5 HRC Resolution 38/5. Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts (July 2018)