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Statement submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Graduate Women International and Statement Cosponsors Mark 30 Years of the Beijing Platform for Action with Calls for Enhanced Digital Education Access and Modern AI Strategies

Recalling the BPfA 12 Critical Areas of Concern that serve as a framework for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women worldwide, GWI underscores the critical area of education. Research consistently demonstrates that access to education increases a woman's earning potential up to 20 per cent, underscoring its role in empowerment and promoting economic growth. (Global Partnership for Education) Therefore, GWI urges Member States to mindfully consider and act upon recommendations proposed by 16 of the world's leading women's organizations.

GWI recognizes that in the 30 years since the adoption of the BPfA, there have been significant strides in education globally and substantial progress in preparing women for the workforce. These advancements reflect the tireless efforts of GWI and statement cosponsors. However, the landscape of education has evolved. The rapid shift to digital education, while offering new opportunities, has also deepened existing inequalities. As such, it is imperative to confront these disparities and ensure that women and girls of all ages fully access and benefit from digital learning initiatives regardless of their circumstances.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the oldest United Nations agency, approximately 2.7 billion people globally currently lack internet access, with women in low-income countries disproportionately without access. Only 20 per cent of women in these regions are connected to the digital world, compared to 32 per cent of men. Significantly, this gap hinders educational opportunities and restricts women's participation in the digital economy, which is projected to reach \$23 trillion by 2025 or 24.3 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product, compared to 17.1 per cent in 2016. (United Nations Universal Postal Union)

The CSW69 with its revised working methods, has the remarkable opportunity to prove its commitment by taking immediate action, recognizing that digital education has the power to dismantle educational barriers for women and girls. Financially supported, flexible, online learning programs can reach women and girls worldwide, making education more accessible for them over their lifetime.

While the exact percentage of increase in female enrollment varies across studies and regions, the McKinsey Higher Education and Online Learning during Coronavirus study presents significant shifts in enrollment trends during the pandemic. The report highlights the rapid expansion of online education platforms. This shift led to significant increases in overall enrollments, particularly benefiting women and demonstrating the potential of digital platforms to engage underserved populations.

Additionally, many institutions reported that the demand for upskilling, driven by changes in the workforce during the pandemic, has encouraged more women to pursue digital courses, further emphasizing the importance of online education in expanding career opportunities and improving retention rates among women and girls in school and workplace. Looking towards the future, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) are poised to enhance educational access further. AI personalizes learning experiences, identifying specific areas where additional learning is required, thus making education tailored and effective.

However, it is crucial to remain vigilant of biases; if not designed thoughtfully, AI systems will perpetuate existing biases. A study by the Berkeley Haas Center for

Equity, Gender, and Leadership analyzed 133 AI systems across various industries, revealing that approximately 44 per cent exhibited gender bias, with 25 per cent demonstrating gender and racial biases. This research echoes many other studies and must be mindfully acknowledged by all Member States.

AI data that reinforces gender stereotypes produces biased outcomes. This underscores the intent of this statement to urge Member States to support the need for careful AI implementation to ensure that technological advancements do not reinforce systemic inequities.

To ensure that AI contributes to gender equality rather than the opposite, women must be educated for AI jobs in all sectors. Currently, women make up only 30 per cent of the global AI workforce. (United Nations University) This underrepresentation risks creating technologies that do not adequately address or understand the needs of women and girls.

Aligning AI development with United Nations initiatives, such as the Human Rights Council Resolution [A/78/L.49](#), is crucial to integrate gender perspectives into AI development, promoting gender equality. GWI urges Member States to reaffirm their commitment to this resolution and adopt concrete actions supporting the development of AI tools that uphold human rights and advance the Sustainable Development Goals.

Developing AI tools that advance gender equality requires the inclusion of data that accurately represent diverse gender experiences, as well as promoting more inclusive and representative AI development teams. Facilitating this access is necessary for further developing AI fields with the diverse experiences and perspectives essential in designing digital and AI tools that promote gender equality.

GWI joins this action by supporting its El Salvador affiliate in holding AI training to boost job market competitiveness and address the gender gap in technology. GWI plans to replicate the program in other of its member affiliates and encourages Member States to support similar efforts. Referencing its 2019 Policy Resolution, GWI calls for increased domestic funding for digital education, with the additional recommendation for AI jobs funding.

To address the aforementioned, GWI calls on Member States to take decisive action and reaffirm their commitment to the BPfA and all other commitments during the three decades since by taking into consideration the following recommendations:

Support local governments and educational institutions financially and strategically by investing in the necessary infrastructure to train all staff and students, including women and girls, in the use of IT services and digital devices. This investment is essential as the World Bank estimates that for every 10 per cent increase in internet penetration, GDP grows by 1.38 per cent in developing countries.

Encourage local, higher education institutions to expand online course offerings, ensuring safe and secure digital environments. A study from the International Finance Corporation indicates that companies adopting online training see a 14 per cent increase in productivity.

Facilitate local and national governments to improve access to electricity across both rural and urban areas. This effort should include partnerships with telecom companies to expand Internet network coverage, enhance the quality of public WiFi, and provide free access in all cities and municipalities. Reliable connectivity in remote areas is essential for equitable digital access. For instance, initiatives in Kenya have successfully increased mobile network access by 40 per cent in rural regions, significantly enhancing educational outcomes. (ITU)

Incentivize local and national governments to collaborate with private sectors and local NGOs to ensure sufficient access to necessary hardware, such as computers and digital devices, is available to those who cannot afford them. The United Nations estimates that providing free digital devices to students can increase school enrollment by 20 per cent.

Mainstream gender perspectives in AI and digital policies, digital tools, programs and budgets to promote lifelong learning for women, including older women, and to avoid gender stereotypes. Evidence from McKinsey shows that organizations with gender-diverse leadership are 15 per cent more likely to have returns above the industry mean.

Recommendations are only as powerful as the data collected. GWI encourages Member States to collaborate with local NGOs such as GWI and statement cosponsors to collect gender-disaggregated data.

In conclusion, GWI reaffirms its commitment to advancing gender equality through inclusive digital education and integrating gender perspectives in AI development. GWI's international network of graduate women and statement cosponsors are ready to mobilize in support of initiatives that ensure both the next generation and older women of today have access to the educational resources and opportunities necessary to thrive in a digital world. Together, we stand with Member States to implement these recommendations.

The following NGOs who are in General or Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC status cosponsor this statement: Australian Graduate Women Inc, Canadian Federation of University Women, Federación Mexicana de Universitarias, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), International Alliance of Women, International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL), International Council of Women, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Make Mothers Matter, Mothers Legacy Project, Soroptimist International, Tandem Project, The, UFER- Unis pour l'Équité et la Fin du Racisme/UFER - United for Equity and Ending Racism, Widows Rights International, Women Graduates - USA, Inc.
