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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

The Classroom as the First Forum of Justice

Graduate Women International (GWI), founded in 1919 and holding special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 1947, together with eleven distinguished cosponsors, submit this statement to the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70). For more than a century, GWI has advanced the principle that education is the root from which all other rights grow. Justice, often discussed in the language of courts and constitutions, begins in the classroom. The priority theme of this session cannot be realized unless education systems themselves are accessible, inclusive, and grounded in equality. Without education, women and girls remain unaware of their rights; without education, discriminatory practices go unchallenged; and without education, justice itself becomes a privilege rather than a universal principle.

For access to justice to become a lived reality, it must rest on the groundwork of education. Learning is not only a means to literacy but the process by which individuals acquire the capacity to question authority, interpret norms, and participate in civic life. Education equips women and girls with the cognitive and analytical skills to navigate legal systems and to recognize when their rights have been infringed. Where education is absent, justice cannot be meaningfully exercised because the foundation for comprehension and critical reasoning is missing. Hence, the ability to read, reason, and seek remedy has not been built. In many countries, in conflict-affected regions, and in communities where barriers to education persist, justice remains a distant abstraction rather than a lived reality.

Educators observe that exclusion is rarely a single event, but it is cumulative. (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM) Report) 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all.) Structural inequities in schooling, biased curricula, and unequal teacher preparation compound over time to produce societies where only a fraction of the population can meaningfully engage with justice systems. (ibid) A justice system, no matter how well designed, cannot function equitably when those it seeks to protect lack the knowledge or confidence to use it. As GWI has long observed, justice is not merely about access to courts but about cultivating a culture of reasoning taught, modeled, and practiced through education.

Justice systems in many contexts remain inaccessible to those who have been denied education. Inability to read or write limits understanding of laws and procedures, while economic exclusion restricts access to legal representation. Moreover, the language of justice itself is dense, procedural, and often disconnected from ordinary life, and remains foreign to those never given the tools to interpret it. For rural and displaced women, the barriers are compounded by physical distance from institutions and by the absence of outreach through educational or community channels. These realities reveal the underlying truth that injustice does not begin with the denial of legal rights but with the denial of learning.

In the twenty-first century, exclusion is taking new and subtler forms. Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital systems increasingly shape how knowledge is produced, shared, and accessed. Yet these same technologies risk reinforcing historical inequities if women and girls remain underrepresented in digital education. Algorithms are not neutral when trained on unequal data, and justice cannot be impartial when shaped by systems designed without

diverse perspectives. Digital literacy can be viewed as the new civic literacy that is essential for participation, for protection, and for ensuring that future systems of justice reflect the values of equality and inclusion.

Education is therefore not only preparation for a professional career but is also preparation for citizenship and for justice itself. A society that invests in its classrooms invests in its courts, because both rely on the same principle: informed participation. When women are educated, communities interpret laws more fairly, hold institutions more accountable, and view justice as a shared responsibility rather than a remote authority (UNESCO GEM 2023, GEM Gender Report 2024).

The interdependence between education and justice is affirmed in key international frameworks. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 10) recognize education as a fundamental right essential to equality. The Beijing Platform for Action underscores the need to “ensure equal access to education and training for women and girls as a means of promoting full participation in social, economic, and political life” (paragraphs 69–81). Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 promotes peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice for all. Together, these commitments affirm that education is not peripheral but integral to the achievement of justice.

The international community has repeatedly affirmed that education is integral to justice and equality. GWI reminds the CSW that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes this interdependence in SDG Target 4.7, which commits States to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable

development, human rights, and gender equality, while the Human Rights Council Resolution 38/9 on the right to education underscores education's transformative role in strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law. GWI draws particular attention to the General Recommendation No. 36 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women Committee, which frames education as a means of achieving substantive equality and justice for women and girls, and General Recommendation No. 33 on women's access to justice, which underscores that legal empowerment depends on awareness, information, and education about rights and available remedies.

As graduate women, GWI believes that the process of learning itself mirrors the process of justice as both require inquiry, fairness, and reflection. GWI underscores that classrooms teach the habits of listening, reasoning, and dialogue that are indispensable to any just society. A legal system cannot thrive where these habits have not been taught. GWI remains concerned that when societies treat education as a policy sector rather than a moral and civic institution, they overlook its deeper function to cultivate citizens capable of interpreting and defending rights.

The education–justice connection also extends across generations. When women understand their rights, they educate their families and communities in turn, creating a multiplier effect that strengthens the social fabric. This generational transmission of awareness transforms justice from a reactive institution into a proactive culture. The most enduring reforms, therefore, are those that invest simultaneously in education and justice, recognizing them as parallel pillars of equality.

As action items to support this statement and to advance access to justice through education, GWI offers the following recommendations to Member States, United Nations bodies, and partners:

1. Integrate education and justice frameworks by embedding civic and rights education into national curricula, ensuring that learning includes an understanding of legal processes, equality, and accountability.
2. Acknowledge education as a structural component of justice reform by embedding educational equity and lifelong learning in national access-to-justice strategies, ensuring that justice policies address the educational conditions necessary for their implementation.
3. Increase investment in inclusive, quality education systems that reach marginalized, rural, and displaced populations, recognizing education as the first point of contact in the justice continuum.
4. Promote legal and rights literacy through education networks by strengthening partnerships among schools, universities, non-governmental organizations, and justice actors to deliver accessible, community-based knowledge about rights and recourse.
5. Advance equal participation in digital and STEM education to enable women and girls to engage with, design, and ethically govern the technologies that increasingly mediate access to justice.
6. Promote cooperation between education and justice ministries through inter-ministerial task forces, ensuring that reforms in one sector reinforce progress in the other,

particularly in implementing CEDAW General Recommendation Numbers 33, 36, and SDG Targets 4.7 and 16.3.

7. Support research and data collection that examine the interdependence between education, civic participation, and justice outcomes, using evidence to inform equitable and sustainable policy reform.

Cosponsoring this statement are the following nongovernmental organizations with General or Special Consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: Afrikanische Frauenorganisation, Australian Women Graduates Inc, Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), International Alliance of Women, International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL), International Council of Women, National Alliance of Women's Organizations, Soroptimist International, Widows Rights International, Women Graduates-USA, Inc., and Zonta International.