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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.

[2 February 2026]

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

Financing Education as a Human Rights Obligation for Sustainable Development and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Graduate Women International (GWI) submits this written statement to the Human Rights Council (HRC) 61st session (HRC61) in response to the panel discussion on Financing sustainable development and economic, social and cultural rights. With consultative status to the Economic and Social Council since 1947, GWI brings a long-standing commitment to advancing the right to education as a necessary condition for gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development. GWI affirms that safe access to quality education is not merely a policy choice, but a core human rights obligation central to States' capacity to realise economic, social and cultural rights across the life course.

The right to education is guaranteed under Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) [1], which obliges States to take steps, individually and through international cooperation, to progressively realise this right to the maximum of available resources. Adequate, sustained, and equitable financing is therefore essential to fulfil States' legal obligations. The ICESCR makes clear that where education systems are underfunded, inequalities deepen, social mobility is constrained, and the enjoyment of related rights, including the rights to work, social security, participation in cultural life, and access to justice, is significantly weakened.

Consistent with this legal framework, GWI has consistently highlighted this relationship between education financing and rights realisation in its engagement with United Nations human rights mechanisms. In its written statement to the HRC 46th session, GWI called on States to increase domestic public funding for education, emphasising that chronic under-investment undermines equality, entrenches poverty, and compromises sustainable development outcomes. Education was framed not only as a right, but as an enabling right essential for the effective exercise of other economic, social and cultural rights. [2]

This position is strongly supported by global evidence. Data from UNESCO and the World Bank demonstrate that although aggregate education spending has increased in nominal terms in many regions, per-learner public expenditure remains insufficient, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Joint UNESCO–World Bank Education Finance Watch analysis indicates that more than 90 per cent of global education spending comes from domestic public and private sources, while international aid accounts for only 2–4 per cent of total education expenditure worldwide, though it represents a larger share in some low-income countries. [3] The analysis further confirms a persistent global education financing gap of approximately USD 100 billion per year to meet internationally agreed commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4. [4] These gaps directly undermine States' capacity to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality lifelong education.

Taken together, these financing patterns underscore that domestic public financing remains the cornerstone of sustainable education systems. While international assistance plays a complementary role, the overwhelming majority of education financing worldwide comes from national public budgets. As a result, domestic fiscal policy is the primary determinant of whether States can meet their human rights obligations in education. Predictable, long-term public investment is therefore essential to protect education systems from fiscal volatility and shifting political priorities.

GWI's policy resolutions adopted by its 34th Triennial General Assembly consistently reflect this reality. Policy Resolution 1 specifically calls on governments to safeguard and expand domestic education budgets as part of national development strategies, and to recognise education spending as long-term social investment rather than discretionary expenditure. [5] Well-resourced public education systems contribute directly to economic participation, institutional stability, and cultural vitality.

However, when public financing is inadequate, education costs are increasingly shifted to households. UNESCO data indicate that families now finance approximately one-quarter of global education expenditure, a trend that raises serious equity and non-discrimination concerns. [6] Cost-sharing mechanisms disproportionately affect girls and women, particularly those from low-income households, rural areas, and marginalised communities. Such financing structures risk reproducing the very inequalities that education is intended to address.

These financing dynamics have direct implications for gender equality and women's economic rights. Persistent gender gaps in access to education, skills development, and lifelong learning continue to constrain women's labour market participation and economic security. UNESCO estimates that more than 119 million girls worldwide remain out of school, a figure closely correlated with under-investment in public education systems. Exclusion from education has long-term consequences for women's access to decent work, social protection, and participation in public and cultural life.

Economic evidence reinforces the rights-based case for gender-responsive education financing. World Bank analysis shows that increased public investment in girls' education is associated with higher lifetime earnings, improved labour-force participation, and stronger national productivity. Conversely, under-financed education systems perpetuate intergenerational poverty and weaken States' compliance with ICESCR obligations related to work, social security, and equality.

Education financing is also essential for the protection of cultural rights and democratic participation. Public education institutions serve as sites for the transmission of knowledge, languages, and cultural heritage, as well as for the development of critical thinking and civic engagement. GWI has consistently emphasised that education extends beyond formal schooling to include adult education, higher education, and lifelong learning opportunities, as reflected in its 2025 Policy Resolution on equitable rights for postgraduate researchers and its 2022 Policy Resolution on promoting and defending the human rights of women in universities and other post-secondary education settings, whose access to funding is often overlooked in education financing frameworks. [7]

Insufficient financing weakens institutional capacity by limiting teacher recruitment and retention, constraining professional development, and undermining infrastructure. UNESCO monitoring links teacher shortages and declining education quality directly to inadequate public expenditure. Investment in teachers, educational leadership, and inclusive curricula is therefore essential not only for learning outcomes, but also for sustaining cultural life, social cohesion, and public trust in institutions. [8]

As education systems increasingly integrate digital technologies, financing strategies must be guided by equity and inclusion. Persistent disparities in access to digital infrastructure, connectivity, and skills reflect broader inequalities in public investment. [9] Technology-driven approaches cannot substitute for sustained investment in teachers, learning environments, and inclusive public systems. Rights-based financing requires that digitalisation complement rather than displace, foundational public education investments.

Education financing must also be embedded within coherent national development and poverty-reduction strategies. The United Nations' Third Decade for the Eradication of Poverty recognises education as a cornerstone of multidimensional poverty reduction. [10] Evidence from UNESCO and the World Bank demonstrates that education spending yields the greatest impact when aligned with employment policies, social protection systems, and gender equality measures. Fragmented or short-term financing approaches weaken these synergies and limit the effectiveness of development investments.

Transparent and participatory budget processes are critical to ensuring accountability in education financing. GWI's engagement with United Nations human rights mechanisms illustrates its essential role as a non-government organization and international network of graduate women in researching and reporting on public expenditure, identifying gaps, and

supporting evidence-based policymaking. Inclusive fiscal governance strengthens democratic oversight and reinforces States' compliance with international human rights obligations.

GWI calls on the HRC61 to:

1. Ensure adequate, sustained, and protected domestic public financing for education, consistent with States' obligations under Article 13 of the ICESCR, and allocate resources to education to the maximum of available resources.
2. Integrate gender-responsive education budgeting into national fiscal frameworks, in order to address structural inequalities affecting girls and women across the life course, including in adult, higher, and lifelong learning.
3. Strengthen public education institutions through sustained investment in teachers, infrastructure, leadership, and inclusive curricula.
4. Reduce household cost burdens by ensuring education remains publicly financed and accessible on a non-discriminatory basis.
5. Align education financing with national sustainable development and poverty-reduction strategies, including employment, skills development, and social protection policies, to reinforce the interdependence of education and other economic and social rights.
6. Ensure transparent and participatory budget processes, enabling meaningful civil society oversight and accountability.
7. Support international cooperation that complements — rather than replaces — domestic responsibility for education financing.

Sustained domestic public investment in education is a precondition for sustainable development and the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights. GWI's longstanding advocacy, reinforced by UNESCO and World Bank evidence, demonstrates that education financing is indispensable for gender equality, poverty reduction, and inclusive societies. The HRC has a critical role in reaffirming States' obligations and supporting policy coherence that translates legal commitments into durable fiscal action.

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Graduate Women International (GWI), NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

[1] ICESCR, Article 13, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

[2] GWI HRC47: https://graduatewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GWI-HRC-46_written-statement_GWI-calls-for-the-increase-in-domestic-funding-for-education_FINAL-UN.pdf

[3] Education Finance Watch 2024;

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099102824144527868/pdf/P50097819250a00ce1812018168df2deaa3.pdf>

[4] Ibid.

[5] GWI 34th triennial Policy Resolutions 2022, https://graduatewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/GWI-Policy-Resolutions-2022-09.09.2022-compiled.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- [6] UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report – Education Finance, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/education-finance>
- [7] GWI 34th triennial Policy Resolution 2, 2022, https://graduatewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/GWI-Policy-Resolutions-2022-09.09.2022-compiled.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- [8] UNESCO Global report on teachers: What you need to know, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/global-report-teachers-what-you-need-know>
- [9] UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report – Technology and Education, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/technology>
- [10] Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, 2018-2027, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/73/298>