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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 the 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.

[06 September 2017]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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## **The commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with a specific focus on challenges in achieving the ends of the declaration.**

In the decade since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), considerable strides have been made in the promotion and protection of indigenous people's rights. Nevertheless, unjustified unequal access to quality and culturally appropriate education persists. As reported by UNESCO in 2016, indigenous children are less likely to remain in school and more likely to underperform academically than non-indigenous children. Concerningly, the issue continues to disproportionately affect indigenous girls. GWI recognises that, to properly achieve UNDRIP's goals and commitments, this gap must be bridged. With this statement marking the ten-year anniversary, GWI draws attention to the issue of indigenous peoples' education, especially its effect on indigenous girls. GWI believes that education is a precondition for empowerment, inclusion and economic success and, to meet the ends of the UNDRIP, the barriers obstructing education must be acknowledged and eliminated.

Indigenous girls are kept out of school by a number of barriers. Chief among them, the fact that formal education often disregards their language and culture. GWI continues to voice concern that, indigenous girls often have no alternative but to attend classes held in a language other than their mother tongue. Their cultures are frequently ignored and devalued; their needs and effective learning style are seldom included in curricula; and, with their societal status, they have zero influence on the pedagogies applied by schools.

The devaluation of indigenous cultures and languages sustains the discrimination faced by indigenous women and girls. If their cultures are continually treated as secondary, then the indigenous identity will continue to be stigmatised. GWI aims to work with States and other international organizations to reverse this outdated trend. The lack of access to linguistically appropriate education, the mistreatment of indigenous culture and the discrimination perpetuated create major barriers for indigenous girls and their successful completion of secondary school. Unnecessarily, these barriers generate a significantly more difficult learning atmosphere and cause an unpleasant, disruptive school environment for indigenous girls; barriers lead to lower performances, increased absenteeism and higher drop-out rates for indigenous girls' worldwide. GWI intends, through its global network of National Federations and Associates, to be the catalysts for change in these non-learning environments.

Still, the aforementioned only touches the surface barriers that obstruct indigenous girls safe access to quality education. Due to intersectional discrimination, indigenous girls must overcome a multitude of other obstacles to obtain a quality education. Firstly, a lack of access to sanitary products and school building infrastructure forces girls to miss classes once they start to get their period sometimes leading to entirely dropping out of school. Indigenous girls living in remote areas are further hindered by a lack of security. On their long journeys to and from school, they risk abduction, rape, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence and harassment are also an ever-present threat within schools. Additionally, cultural norms and traditions play a role in keeping indigenous girls out of education. These norms and practices include early marriage and early pregnancy, female genital mutilation, and an unequal division of domestic labour each of which GWI actively advocates against through its global network of some 18'000 members.

The continued lack of equal access to quality and culturally appropriate education violates several articles of the UNDRIP, including: article 13 (1) on the right of indigenous people to transmit their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures to future generations; 14 (1)(2)(3) on the right to establish and control their own educational system, to all levels and forms of education, and to education in their own culture and language; and 15 (1) on the right of indigenous people to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories

and aspirations to be reflected in education. Furthermore, it violates article 44 which states that all rights guaranteed by the declaration are to be enjoyed equally by men and women.

However, the consequences of the education gap reach well beyond obstructing the full enjoyment of rights relating to schooling and the transmission of traditional knowledge. Of serious concern to GWI is that the education gap hinders the economic empowerment of indigenous women and girls. Indigenous women often find that their lack of education makes them unable to access opportunities for employment, for example, at mining sites. UN Women reports that some 90% of employees at mining sites are male; indigenous women, unable to get work, are usually driven to prostitution. Confounding reports by UN Women reveal that 33% of people living in extreme rural poverty come from indigenous communities which is far too excessive of a percentage given that indigenous peoples constitute a small portion of the world's total population. GWI aims to decrease this excessive figure by raising its global voice to call on States to implement change that includes indigenous women to the level for which these women can successfully adjust.

What's more, the lack of education prevents indigenous women from fully understanding their rights, including land rights. According to the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 50% of gold produced between 1995 and 2005 came from indigenous territories. Yet, many indigenous communities remain poor and marginalized. This stems from the fact that indigenous people, women in particular, are often not fully aware of their rights, and of the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. Aggravating the problem is the fact that lack of education also precludes involvement in decision-making processes. Yet again, indigenous women are most disadvantaged, as reported by the International Fund for Agricultural development, being excluded from decision-making most often.

There are also serious consequences in terms of health. Lack of access to culturally and linguistically appropriate education has been shown to lead to loss of identity and school maladjustment. As reported by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, loss of identity and school maladjustment are some of the leading causes of substance abuse and suicide, two prominent problems within indigenous communities.

There are two 2030 Agenda indicators of the global indicator framework that refer directly to indigenous peoples that will measure progress of implementation of the 17 sustainable development goals. One is indicator 2.3.2 and of particular relevance to GWI is indicator 4.5.1 that ensures the equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for indigenous peoples.

### Recommendations

Bearing in mind that equal access to quality, culturally appropriate education is crucial to the implementation of all parts of UNDRIP, GWI makes the following short recommendations to States that bear longer-term, positive results for indigenous women and girls:

- Ensure access to bi-lateral, culturally appropriate education that involves indigenous women and girls and their community and government leadership.
- Provide access to bilingual or linguistically appropriate education.
- Ensure access to sanitary products and toilet facilities in every school.
- Teach the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to increase awareness of indigenous rights and tolerance.
- Collect, analyse and distribute disaggregated data on women and girls' health, education and employment.
- Take action on data.
- Contribute positively to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- Enlist the collaboration of non-governmental organizations who are subject matter experts.