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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

Joint written statement* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), Canadian Federation of University Women, Women Graduates - USA, Inc., non-governmental organizations 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.

[04 June 2020]

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

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Graduate Women International, the Canadian Federation of University Women and Women Graduates-USA voice concerns about the COVID-19 shadow pandemic of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is the shadow pandemic fallout of COVID-19. As does COVID-19, GBV knows no nationality, culture, race, sexual orientation or religious boundaries. Globally, more than 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the last 12 months.¹ Crises even less severe than the COVID-19 pandemic have been linked to increased interpersonal violence, including incidence of GBV.² The associated fear and uncertainty of lockdown and quarantine requirements provide an enabling environment that often increases occurrences of GBV. As an organisation committed to the empowerment of all women and girls Graduate Women International (GWI), and its 51 National Federations and Associations, remain unwaveringly united agents of change towards the elimination of GBV. Collectively, GWI's more than 14,000 global members are calling on governments worldwide to urgently combat domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 with practical and innovative measures to ensure adequate reporting of the phenomenon and assistance for GBV victims.

Emerging data from helplines and shelters across the world show more and more clearly every day that GBV and particularly domestic violence has intensified worldwide with the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, GBV remains widely underreported. According to UN Women, less than 40% of women who experience violence report these crimes or seek help of any sort.³ As domestic violence shelters or are reaching capacity or unable to take on new victims due to the measures taken to contain the virus, women and girls, victims of GBV are finding themselves more isolated and vulnerable than ever.

Concerningly, the current situation makes reporting of the crime more difficult and less likely as GBV victims have limited access to helpline and contacts with the police, justice and social services, who are usually at the forefront of GBV response. These disruptions also fuel impunity for the perpetrators, even more so when one in four countries have no laws protecting women and girls from GBV and domestic violence. Moreover, perpetrators are making use of COVID-19 as a means of further isolating victims from their friends and family and further aggravating the situation and preventing them from seeking help. This situation requires the urgent attention and alleviation methods by the Human Rights Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

GWI calls for the immediate cooperation with Member States to urgently address the rising GBV pandemic that is putting the safety and well-being of millions of women and girls around the world at risk. In line with UN Women recommendations, "helplines, psychosocial support and online counselling should be boosted, using technology-based solutions such as SMS, apps, online tools and networks to expand social support, and to reach women with no access to smart phones or internet".⁴ GWI and international affiliates located around the world call on governments to mobilize police and justice systems to ensure that incidents of violence against women and girls are given high priority with no impunity for perpetrators.

¹ UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155>.

² PETERMAN et. Al. (2020) Pandemics and Violence against women and children, working paper 528, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/pandemics-and-vawg-april2.pdf>.

³ UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155>.

⁴ Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women <https://mailchi.mp/info/statement-violence-against-women-and-girls-the-shadow-pandemic-from-un-women-executive-director-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka?e=2c9fe72ff0>.

Finally, GWI raises concerns that, whilst more and more media outlets around the world are reporting the ongoing rise in GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic, such publications concerningly lack information about where GBV survivors can find help and support. Providing victims of GBV with contact to GBV actors, including a referral pathway or GBV special and focal point must be a priority and is even more vital as GBV victims are isolated. GWI suggests that States elaborate action plans where resources other than traditional State resources (i.e. the private sector and the media) are taken into consideration to provide effective help to women and girls in every type of vulnerable situation, as stipulated in Article 17 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).⁵ GWI further stresses that the current situation urgently requires a connection be made to GBV and women's security in disease outbreak in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

Moreover, women need to be included in decision-making processes at all levels. Greater involvement of women in leadership results in a broader perspective on the crisis and paves the way for the deployment of richer and more complete solutions than if they had been imagined by a homogeneous group. While crises affect everyone, women and girls are disproportionately impacted due to their relatively disadvantaged situation, distinct social obligations and responsibilities and the high prevalence of GBV. At the same time, women are often on the frontline of crises, serving as vital first responders, rebuilders and peacebuilders in their communities. They ensure the well-being of their families and communities and help their societies to “build back better.”⁶

As an organization founded by graduate women in peace and friendship for women and girls, GWI has the duty to ensure that the extraordinary circumstances and measures taken during COVID-19 do not put women and girls at risk of falling victim to GBV and deprive them of their fundamental right to live a life free of violence. Considering the urgent need to put women and girls at the forefront of response agenda and policies, GWI appeals to the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge Member States to:

- Encourage the collaboration between State authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGO) active in the range of GBV to provide shelters and support to women and girls.
- Increase the number of women shelters as well as shelter places available in all regions of the world.
- Establish national and regional helplines, psychosocial support and online counselling" using technology-based solutions such as apps, SMS, online tools and networks to expand social support, and to reach women without access to smart phones or internet.
- Disseminate information nationwide on where to look for help by different means of communication (i.e. newspapers, national TV, leaflets, radio, etc.).
- Encourage the participation of the private sector and the media in the prevention of GBV and domestic violence.
- Adopt specific and detailed legislation protecting women from GBV and domestic violence.
- Sensitise and train police to remain alert towards signs of GBV and domestic violence and to intervene where necessary.
- Ensure that perpetrators are removed from their environment despite the current circumstances.

⁵ UNDP <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/people/gender-equality/gender-and-crisis-response-and-recovery.html>.

⁶ CHAMPOUX PAILLE Louise, CROTEAU Anne-Marie <https://theconversation.com/why-women-leaders-are-excelling-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-138098>.

- Increase research on gender-disaggregated data on the effects of global pandemics on the population, and particularly on women and girls.
- Increase the collection and dissemination of data on GBV and domestic violence. Reliable, systematic and comparable data on intimate partner violence (IPV) is necessary to measure the extent, dynamics and consequences of this form of violence against women.
- Encourage and ensure the meaningful and effective participation of women in decision-making processes concerning disease outbreaks at all levels.
- Create task forces to provide advice on gender-sensitive responses in situations of disease outbreak.
- Encourage neighbourly solidarity in times of disease outbreak.

GWI is a membership-based international NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland, with affiliates and independent members in over 60 countries. Founded in 1919, GWI is the leading girls' and women's global organisation advocating for women's rights, equality and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels. GWI is in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1947 and maintains official relations with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO).
